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# Laughing in the Face of Oppression: The Nature of Political Satire Under Different Types of Political Regimes

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines how different types of political regimes shape the nature of the political satire produced under them. Unlike traditional journalism, the sly character of political humor may enable it to operate with more freedom than other forms of media while still providing social critique. This research examines three different case studies: the United States (democracy), Venezuela (semi-authoritarian), and Cuba (authoritarian) and evaluates their satire on how openly critical it is and what type of censorship it suffers. Through extensive content analysis of satirical work produced within the country, as well as a historical research into the censorship of its authors, I create a comprehensive account of the nature of political satire in that country within the past five years. This study finds that, while the nature of satire in democratic and authoritarian states is as to be expected, semi-authoritarian states experience an intense degree of political criticism comparable to that of a democracy.

*Keywords:* political satire, political regime, Venezuela, Cuba, United States

## INTRODUCTION

Every Monday at 8pm, Venezuelans would gather around their television sets to tune into *Radio Rochela*. Airing from 1959 until 2010, *Radio Rochela* was a staple on Venezuelan late-night television. Featuring sketches that parodied Venezuelan culture and politics, it aired for over four decades on the public broadcast television channel Radio Caracas Televisión, also known as RCTV.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, the Chavez administration announced that it would not renew RCTV's national broadcasting license<sup>2</sup>. From then on, RCTV would only air in the homes of those who could afford cable television – away from the middle and lower classes, who constitute the majority of the governments' voters. For years, RCTV had produced telenovelas, talk shows, newscasts, and comedy sketches that were present in every Venezuelan home. However, the increasingly undemocratic government had taken offense to *Radio Rochela's* sense of humor, which spared no one.

These sketches ranged from topics like the everyday struggles of Venezuelans to the mannerisms of president Chavez and his public gaffes. In one infamous series of skits, Chavez was rebaptized '*Mico-mandante*' (Monkey in power), a play on his formal title '*Mi comandante*' (My commander). *Humorista* Emilio Lovera interpreted the president and copied many of his mannerisms, particularly his distinctive slow drawl punctuated with vigorous exclamations. The sketch showed the president in his office as Lina Ron, one of his most fervent real-life supporters, attempted to inform the president of an imaginary threat. Instead, Lovera as Chavez settled into one of his long-winded monologues about his hometown in the rural state Barinas

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<sup>1</sup> Los 50 Años de La Rochela. (2009, December 13)

<sup>2</sup> Chávez cancela la licencia a una televisión privada que tacha de 'golpista' (2006, December 28).

which Venezuelans were often subjected to during his mandatory hours-long televised speeches.<sup>3</sup> In another skit, *Radio Rochela* mercilessly mocked one of Chavez's more public gaffe – when he erroneously conjugated a misspelled verb during a televised transmission of Mission: Robinson, his adult literacy program.<sup>4 5</sup>

This barefaced attempt to censor both the media and satirists did not go unpunished by the general public. As a repercussion, a wave of protests rocked Venezuela's major cities as citizens took to the streets.<sup>6</sup> For a week during the fifth grade, I sat in near-empty classrooms: nobody could come to school because the major vehicular arteries of Caracas were blocked off by masses of people coming out to protest. My teacher, whose strict anti-cell phone policy had seemed unshakable, instructed the few of us there to put our phones on vibrate – “Just in case”.

Although RCTV and consequently Radio Rochela were eventually taken off national airwaves, other forms of political satire remain strong in Venezuela. *Humoristas*, as political satirists are known, continue to write essays and perform live stand-up comedy both domestically and abroad. Online sites are still a source of humor, relentlessly targeting Venezuelan politics and the current Maduro administration. However, as Venezuela continues to transition away from democracy and the space for free speech continues to close, there is a question surrounding political satire's capacity to survive.

This paper principally attempts to answer the following question: *how does the type of political regime affect the nature of political satire?* By the nature of political satire, I am referring to the quality of political satire within a certain type of political regime. How much satire exists in a country, how critical it is of government officials and major political actors, and

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<sup>3</sup> Micomandante Chavez (Video). (2007, March 20).

<sup>4</sup> Chávez se equivoca en clase. (2003, September 16).

<sup>5</sup> Radio Rochela: Mision Robinson (Video). (2007, April 16).

<sup>6</sup> TV station chief: We are not afraid of Chavez. (2007, May 30).

how varied are the forms in which it manifests? How does this differ between a democracy and an autocratic regime? Additionally, this research examines the ways in which political satire is censored. If political satire differs from regime type to regime type, then do the mechanisms by which satirists are silenced differ as well? Do governments limit political satire in different ways than they would other forms of free expression?

### **Significance**

The breadth and variety of media have long been considered as an important measure of the extent of freedom of speech. Conversations on these freedoms, which are regarded as inalienable human rights, are never far from the subject of censorship. Therefore, any discussion pertaining to any aspect of the media and its censorship is a discussion on the violation of basic human rights. As such, restrictions on political satire could signal broader violations of free speech and human rights.

Moreover, political satire is as integral to the media as 'serious' journalism. It is an art that integrates social critique with comedy, and most often targets and ridicules ideologies, politicians, and governments and their policies. Because of its inherently critical nature, political satire and its authors are both vulnerable to government censorship. Like other forms of media that provide a forum for dissent, authoritarian regimes may seek to curtail that possibility.

However, there exists the possibility that political satire is a uniquely different form of freedom of speech. It is dissent veiled by comedy, and hard to pinpoint as an overt form of protest. Cartoons and absurd essays are much less explicit than a protestor's sign. Therefore, satire might be the form of free speech best suited for countries where governments are beginning to close the space for vocal and visible opposition.

This raises multiple questions. The first of which is: can satire operate in a restricted space that other forms of free speech cannot? Furthermore, does this mean that repressive regimes foster more political satire or less than their democratic counterparts?

### Literature Review

Existing work that specifically analyzes and provides a theoretical framework to expound upon how political satire is affected by political regimes is limited. The primary explanation for differences between political satire produced under different regimes is the regime type itself. Leonard Freedman's *The Offensive Art* (2009) is a historical narrative that analyzes the struggling dynamic between political satirists and their targets under two types of political regimes: democratic and authoritarian. Little to no work exists that analyzes political satirists under a third hybrid regime, one which is not entirely democratic but falls short of succumbing to totalitarianism.

Additionally, this study utilizes content analysis to determine the nature of political satire in these countries. "Content analysis is a class of research methods at the intersection of the qualitative and quantitative traditions," wrote Duriau, Reger, and Pfarrer.<sup>7</sup> According to Berelson, considered father of content analysis, it is "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication."<sup>8</sup> This research has been praised for:

"[B]ridg[ing] the gap between large-sample archival research, which may suffer from internal validity issues, and small sample research, which allows for the collection of primary data and in-depth analyses but may suffer from external validity problems. Analyzing the content of a firm's press releases, media coverage, or stakeholder blogs

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<sup>7</sup> Duriau, V., Reger, R., & Pfarrer, M. (January 01, 2007). A Content Analysis of the Content Analysis Literature in Organization Studies.

<sup>8</sup> Berelson, B. (1952). Content Analysis in Communication Research.

can enhance archival research (which has been criticized for failure to provide insight into cognitive processes), while maintaining the advantages of using large samples.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, reading this paper necessitates a previous knowledge of the characteristics of multiple political systems. According to Larry Diamond, democracies are typified by (a) free and fair elections for choosing and replacing the government; (b) active citizen participation of the people in political and civic life; (c) protection of human rights, and (d) A rule of law, under which all citizens are equal.<sup>10</sup> The emphasis of free and fair elections is key to creating the ideal representative democracy.<sup>11</sup> To ensure these principles are upheld, democracies require freedom of political expression, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and internet democracy so that citizens are informed and able to vote according to their best interests.<sup>12</sup>

Authoritarianism, on the other hand, is typified by a strong, centralized power and limited to no political freedoms. Because individual freedoms are less important than the state and power is highly concentrated in one branch of government, there is no system of checks and balances that can provide accountability.<sup>13</sup> Juan Linz best describes the characteristics of authoritarian states in his work “An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain”: (1) limited political pluralism, (2) a basis for legitimacy based on emotion (3) minimal social mobilization, and (4) informally defined executive power.<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, semi-authoritarian regimes are widely held to be those that combine features of democracies and autocracies.<sup>1516</sup> There is no set combination of features, as each semi-

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<sup>9</sup> Pfarrer, M. D., Pollock, T. G., & Rindova, V. P. (October 01, 2010). A Tale of Two Assets: The Effects of Firm Reputation and Celebrity on Earnings Surprises and Investors' Reactions.

<sup>10</sup> Diamond, L. J., & Molino, L. (2005). *Assessing the quality of democracy*.

<sup>11</sup> Kelsen, H. (1955). *Foundations of democracy*. Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press.

<sup>12</sup> Barak, A. (2008). *The judge in a democracy*.

<sup>13</sup> Sekiguchi, M. (2009). *Government and politics: Volume 1*.

<sup>14</sup> Linz, J. J. (1964). An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain.

<sup>15</sup> Montesquieu, C. S., & Nugent, T. (1773). *The spirit of laws*.

<sup>16</sup> Quigley, C. (1983). *Weapons systems and political stability: a history*.

authoritarian state is its own distinctive case. In some literature, these states are referred to as semi-democracies.<sup>17</sup>

*Hypothesis #1: In terms of quality, satire in democracies is both more critical of its recipients and broader in the number of targets it has; whereas satire within authoritarian states is less critical and narrow in the breadth of its targets.*

According to Freedman, there is simply more political satire within democracies than there is under autocracies. Due to the very nature of a democratic political regime, political satire is at its fullest development when it exists within a society that safeguards civil liberties such as freedoms of speech and press. These freedoms allow political satire to flourish. Moreover, democracies tend to provide more material for its satirists to mock. A breadth of politicians vying for power, political scandals, and even election cycles give satirists on both ends of the ideological spectrum a wealth of material to work with.<sup>18</sup>

Perfect democracies do not exist within the current international system, but Freedman examines the United States and the United Kingdom as its closest approximations.<sup>19</sup> The United Kingdom, in particular, has a long history of political satire and satirists, the ranks of which include illustrious personages such as novelists Orwell and Dickens, playwrights Shaw and Shakespeare. Much like in the United States, political satirists in the United Kingdom have a penchant for targeting its current prime minister to some form of ridicule, particularly since the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> Whether Thatcher, Blair, Brown, Cameron, or even Churchill himself, all British prime minister of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have been subject to some form humorous critique.

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<sup>17</sup> Everdell, W. R. (2000). *The end of kings: A history of republics and republicans*.

<sup>18</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art: Political Satire and Its Censorship Around the World from Beerbohm to Borat*.

<sup>19</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art: Political Satire and Its Censorship Around the World from Beerbohm to Borat*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, this satire exists in multiple forms: in print, on the internet, in art, in film, and on television. Within the UK, there is a plethora of satirists and outlets for them to publish their work. In print, the British have *Private Eye*, a satirical current affairs magazine which has been in publication since 1961.<sup>21</sup> Cartoonists have had their pieces published in nationally syndicated newspapers: Steve Bell and Martin Rowson in *The Guardian*, Peter Brookes in *The Times*. On television, satirists have had an outlet since the 1980s beginning with the creation of *Yes, Minister* and its sequel *Yes, Prime Minister*. Even Sacha Baron Cohen, known primarily by U.S. audience for his leading role in *Borat*, began on British television with the *Da Ali G Show*. *Have I Got News for You* has been mocking British politics since 1990, and remains one of the most successful satirical news shows in the country. Online, there exists an assortment of satirical news sites such as *The Daily Mash*, *NewsBiscuit*, and *NewsThump*. Even British theater has a longstanding history as a venue for satire: in the 1960s, *Beyond the Fringe* was a revolutionary stage show that was unapologetic in its portrayal of authority figures.

Within France, there is a long tradition of political satire that predates the French Revolution. Satire is, in its own way, a sacred inalienable right of the French people.<sup>22</sup> Due to this freedom afforded to them, French political satirists are often controversially critical of politics and government, often publishing fulminating pieces that push beyond the boundaries of propriety.

One such irreverent publication is the infamous *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, known around the world for the tragic shooting that took place on its premises in 2015.<sup>23</sup> Prior to the tragedy, *Charlie Hebdo* had been publishing cartoons depicting Mohammed since the early 2000s.

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<sup>21</sup> Private Eye. (2016).

<sup>22</sup> Piet, R. (2015, January 14). Why Satire is Holy to the French.

<sup>23</sup> Withnall, A., & Lichfield, J. (2015, January 7). Charlie Hebdo shooting: At least 12 killed as shots fired at satirical magazine's Paris office.

Initially republishing the controversial twelve editorial cartoons produced by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo* soon began to add their own installments in the series. The situation soon escalated in 2012 when cartoons portraying a nude Mohammed were published in the magazine which outraged French Muslim groups. *Charlie Hebdo* was similarly disrespectful with other groups of French society: policemen, immigrants, and the Catholic clergy.<sup>24</sup>

Satire within democracies does not adhere to only one end of the ideological spectrum, which broadens the number of potential targets. Just like the *Charlie Hebdo* adheres to the left-wing, there are satirical publications in France that identify with the right-wing. *Minute* is a long-running satirical newspaper with an editorial line that falls firmly within the far-right.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, *Le Canard enchaîné*, France's most successful satirical newspaper is decidedly neutral in its political alignment.<sup>26</sup>

Surprisingly, there does exist political satire within authoritarian states, though severely limited both in quantity and variety of form. Authoritarianism provides the government with close to absolute control over its population.<sup>27</sup> Falling short of engaging in Orwellian practices, these states have the ability to actively circumscribe political satire within its borders. Thus, what little political satire does so within the permitted space afforded to it by the thin veneer of comedy. In his book, Freedman chose to examine the Soviet Union under Stalin as his example for an authoritarian regime, there exist other modern case studies around the world that similarly illustrate of political satire under these regimes.

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<sup>24</sup> Charlie Hebdo and its place in French journalism. (2015, January 08).

<sup>25</sup> Minute. (2013).

<sup>26</sup> Le Canard Enchaîné. (2016)

<sup>27</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art*.

Stalinist Russia kept a close eye on satire. Although Stalin was fond of the arts, he only appreciated them when they depicted him favorably and ruthlessly dismantled them when they did not. Upon his arrival to power, the wealth of satirical magazines that had emerged during the 1920s was narrowed down to one: the *Krokodil*. Even the creators of satirical contents began to reduce in numbers. Faced with increasingly punitive restrictions on their art, satirists such as Yevgeny Zamyatin and Mikhail Bulgakov endeavored to escape the country. Only one of the two succeeded. Even those not overly critical were still under suspicion - Vladimir Mayakovsky, once sympathetic to the party line, found his work facing party backlash for not clearly adhering to the Soviet ideology. With no audience for his work, Mayakovsky committed suicide in 1930.<sup>28</sup>

This trend of limited satire under authoritarian states continues today. North Korea is one of the last vestiges of the authoritarian regimes of the Cold War era. Authorities in Pyongyang are quick to silence satire and any dissidence in general. In what would seem to be a satirical piece but as actually factual news, the government chose to ban sarcasm in September 2016.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, a simple Google search of ‘satire in North Korea’ yields little to no results. The only notable result is an article on state-sponsored satire, which mocks president Obama and “oppressed” South Koreans.<sup>30</sup> Some results do not originate from within North Korea. These online blogs are run by North Koreans living abroad or foreign individuals.<sup>31</sup>

The forms satire takes under authoritarian states seems to be influenced by that country’s culture and history of satirical tradition. For example, during the 1980s in Sri Lanka, the highly repressive government permitted extremely satirical theatrical performances that consistently

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Agerholm, H. (2016, September 8). North Korea bans sarcasm because Kim Jong-un fears people only agree with him ‘ironically’.

<sup>30</sup> Griffiths, J. (2015, September 16). North Korea’s ‘Saturday Night Live’ takes on Obama, ‘oppressed’ South Koreans.

<sup>31</sup> North Korea denounces “rubbish-like provisions” of H.R. 757. (2016, March 04).

targeted the government. Within Sinhalese culture, the theater has traditionally provided a space for satire and ridicule – it is ingrained within their customs. Because satire fell under societal ritual, the government found no other alternative than to tolerate it<sup>32</sup>.

Satire within non-democracies can be best described as ‘narrow’. First and foremost, government policies restrict how critical satirists can be. Second, satire in non-democracies tends to take the form of dissent: it targeting the administration in power and those who actively seek to silence satirists. This is due, in part, to the limited number of political actors within a one party system (making the authorities in power the only available targets for political satire).

Under Stalinist rule, Andre Zhdanov was chosen as the Politburo’s culture specialist, which granted him special powers to monitor the arts and “correct” those that deviated from the party line. Stalin, and by extension Zhdanov, permitted satire that was critical of everyday Soviet life and the bureaucracy, which spanned multiple cartoons that targeted unimportant mid-level officials. Satire that targeted the regime itself and pointed out any intrinsic flaws of the Soviet model and ideology were found to be unpardonable and subversive.<sup>33</sup>

In today’s Saudi Arabia, lèse-majesté laws prevent satirists from targeting the Saudi royal family. The wildly popular online *La Yekthar Show*<sup>34</sup> generally refrains from criticizing the family; instead, directs its humor towards the bureaucracy, non-royal officials, and government policies. Most of their criticism is further circumscribed by their use of symbolism. For example, the use of a green folder signifies unemployment. Rather than verbalize the criticism, the

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<sup>32</sup> Chatterjee, S.(2001). *Sri Lankan Theater in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space* (review).

<sup>33</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art*.

<sup>34</sup> La Yekthar Show. (2016).

language and visuals are coded in such a way that is not directly offensive to the existing regime.<sup>35</sup>

The Chinese government, to this day, is notorious for its impositions on freedom of speech. However, online political satire has infiltrated the daily lives of Chinese citizens, who perceive it not as a social networking practice.<sup>36</sup> Through jokes, ‘national sentence-making’, multimedia remix, online performance art, and ‘online news comments’; Chinese citizens partake in political satire every day of their lives. Rather than the straightforward mediums of critiques that one might expect in typical satire, these jokes are subtle and therefore go unsanctioned.<sup>37</sup>

*Hypothesis #2: Censorship within non-democracies is usually traditional and often state-sponsored, while censorship in democratic regimes arises from social norms in the form of societal taboos.*

*Traditional censorship*, or state-sponsored censorship, is characterized by government policies and legislation that limit the coverage of political news, persecute journalists and other members of the press (such as satirists) intrude in the affairs of the media, and/or create copious legal and economic obstacles for the press. This type of censorship is overt, the kind that human rights organizations find easy to detect and measure. It is also the form of censorship generally employed in authoritarian states. There, “(p)olitical satire, where it existed at all, was either constantly circumscribed by official censorship or actually taken over by the regime to attack the regime’s foreign and domestic opponents”.<sup>38</sup> There exist countries where traditional forms of persecution against satirists continues. In 1998, the International Press Institute continually

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<sup>35</sup> Owens, S. (2012, May 30). Saudi Satire Ignites YouTube’s Massive Growth in Middle East.

<sup>36</sup> Yang, G., & Jiang, M. (2015). The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance.

<sup>37</sup> Y Yang, G., & Jiang, M. (2015). The networked practice of online political satire in China.

<sup>38</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art*.

reported Uzbekistan that harassed and persecuted its journalists. The government's strict practice of censorship led to the arrest of satirist Shadi Mardiev, among other repressive measures ("Uzbekistan").<sup>39</sup>

Zimbabwe has been under the rule of its authoritarian leader, Robert Mugabe, since the 1980s. *Zambezi News* is a satirical show aimed at parodying the government's official mouthpiece, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. The young comedians have been attempting to reach fellow Zimbabweans since shooting the show's first season in 2011. Distributing was initially the hardest – originally, the cast printed and distributed thousands of DVDs across the country. With the advent of social media and messaging apps like WhatsApp, their jobs have been made a little easier. Still, these satirists operate under risk: in Zimbabwe, it is illegal to insult the president's authority.<sup>40</sup>

In 2012 Mahmoud Shokraye, an Iranian cartoonist, was sentenced to receive twenty-five lashes after a local MP took offense to his caricature. Ahmad Lotfi Ashtiani, MP for Arak, was pictured dressed as a footballer after Iranian authorities were criticized for interfering in the country's sports. Ashtiani sued Shokraye in court and won. Fellow Iranian and journalist condemned Shokraye's sentence, attributing it to the regime's intolerance for criticism in any form.<sup>41</sup>

In Colombia, the 1999 murder of journalist and *humorista* Jaime Garzón remains an unsolved mystery. Garzón rose to fame with his work in satirical TV shows, *Zoociedad* and *¡Quac! El noticiero*. An advocate for government peace negotiations with the leftist rebel groups, his death was officially attributed to Carlos Castaño, a leader within the right-wing

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<sup>39</sup> Uzbekistan. (1998).

<sup>40</sup> McChrystal, R. (2016, June 16). *Zambezi News: Satire leaves "a lot of ruffled feathers in its wake"* - Index on Censorship.

<sup>41</sup> Dehghan, S. K. (2012, May 09). *Iranian cartoonist sentenced to 25 lashes for drawing MP*.

paramilitary. However, Castaño was never brought to justice and is now presumed to be dead. Since the controversial murder, rumors circled that Garzón's murder was ordered by Colombian military officials. To support this claim, Garzón's family has brought forth key evidence that incriminates retired general Rito Alejo del Río Rojas as having lied in his original testimonial.

Sometimes authoritarian governments do not only silence satirical publications but additionally convert them into vehicles for propaganda. The aforementioned *Krokodil*, which survived Stalin's initial purge of magazines, was later absorbed by the official daily newspaper, *Pravda*. From then on, it would direct its criticism towards the mid-level bureaucracy and domestic and foreign threats to the establishment.<sup>42</sup>

This is not to say that there is no censorship whatsoever in democratic societies. Traditional forms of censorship are not likely to emerge within regimes that actively safeguard and promote freedoms of speech and press. However, human rights organizations that measure censorship and other abuses, such as Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders, generally focus on traditional forms of speech suppression. According to Sapiezynska and Lagos, "(...) instruments—with their focus on violence against journalists and government constraints on media—are more appropriate for assessments in nondemocratic countries than for understanding the subtle problems of democracies."<sup>43</sup> Thus, the general public labors under the misconception that there exist no limits to freedom of speech in democracies.

Rather than being restricted by explicit government policies, satirists within democracies often find themselves conceding defeat to societal norms and expectations for comedy. In democratic societies, there exist deeply entrenched taboos that few satirists would brave public

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<sup>42</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art*.

<sup>43</sup> Sapiezynska, E., and Lagos, C. (2016). *Media Freedom Indexes in Democracies: A Critical Perspective Through the Cases of Poland and Chile*.

backlash for. In the United Kingdom, topics such as war, race, and religion are areas where satirists are careful to toe the line.<sup>44</sup>

Often the key to permissibility in these topics is timing. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the possibility of war on Iraq, British satirists were reluctant aim their brand of acerbic wit towards any of the actors involved. Cartoonist Martin Rowson of *the Guardian* was reluctant to draw anything critical and instead used his craft to acknowledge the tragedy of the events.<sup>45</sup> However, nearly a month after the attacks, female Muslim comedian Shazia Mirza took a risk and opened her stand-up show with the line “Hi, my name’s Shazia Mirza, at least that’s what it says on my pilot’s license.”<sup>46</sup>

Following both 9/11 and the London bombings on July 7, 2005, the British media turned its eye towards the country’s Muslim population. This interwove the delicate subjects of race and religion, which became tenuous areas for satirists to approach. The public was resistant towards legislation intended to limit incitement of racial or religious hatred, on the grounds of freedom of speech. The legislation would permit the prosecution of anyone who published the infamous *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons. However, the British media were nearly unanimous in abstaining from republishing the cartoons; the only mention of these existed in journalist coverage over the outcry in France.<sup>47</sup>

*Hypothesis #3: In semi-authoritarian states, the struggle between satirists and the regime results in satire that is both highly critical in quality yet limited in quantity.*

In literature surrounding political satire, there is very little that analyzes semi-authoritarian states: a state that departs from democracy but has not achieved full

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<sup>44</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art*.

<sup>45</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art*.

<sup>46</sup> Cavendish, D. (2015, August 12). Edinburgh 2015: Shazia Mirza, A Work in Progress, The Stand, review: ‘brave and urgent’.

<sup>47</sup> Freedman, L. (2009). *The Offensive Art*.

authoritarianism. These states exhibit an incoherent mix of democratic and autocratic features, usually permitting some degree of opposition without fully developing mechanisms through which it can redress grievances.<sup>48</sup> In these states, the regime increasingly implements punitive policies towards the vocal opposition, including satire. Regardless, these satirists, accustomed to the freedoms previously afforded them in democracy, exhibit increasingly critical content even as their avenues for publication decrease. As a result, satire in semi-authoritarian states is limited in quantity yet increasing in quality. Rather than exhibit a linear decline in the quality of satire from democratic states to authoritarian (similar to the linear decline in quantity), there may be an upwards curve in-between.

## **Methodology**

### Goals

This paper attempts to answer the subsequent research question, “*How does the type of political regime affect the nature of political satire?*” and, in doing so, substantiate the following hypotheses:

1. In terms of quality, satire in democracies is both more critical of its recipients and broader in the number of targets it has; whereas satire within authoritarian states is less critical and narrow in the breadth of its targets.
2. Censorship within non-democracies is usually traditional and often state-sponsored, while censorship in democratic regimes arises from social norms in the form of societal taboos.
3. In semi-authoritarian states, the struggle between satirists and the regime results in satire that is both highly critical in quality yet limited in quantity.

### Case selection

Within this paper, three countries have been selected as case studies representative of three different regime types: democracy, autocracy, and semi-authoritarian.

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<sup>48</sup> Regan, P., & Bell, S. (2010). Changing Lanes or Stuck in the Middle: Why Are Anocracies More Prone to Civil Wars?

United States (Democracy): For the most part, the United States has a long history of relatively stable democratic transitions. Since the 1960s, most U.S. citizens have enjoyed the civil liberties granted by the country's founding document, the U.S. constitution. It also enjoys from a standing tradition of fierce legal protections surrounding freedoms of speech and press. According to Freedom House, the United States ranks an exemplary 90 in its 2016 annual score report, achieving the designation of Free.<sup>49</sup>

Venezuela (Semi-authoritarian): In the 1960s, it seemed as if Venezuela had left behind the problematic cycle of military dictatorships and coup d'états that the rest of Latin America was still embroiled in. The country enjoyed a series of stable democratic transitions for nearly forty years, until the 1990s. Beginning with an attempted military coup in 1992 and followed by the election of the coup leader, Hugo Chávez; Venezuela has experienced a steady decline in civil liberties since the current establishment arrived in power. Nearly two decades later, Venezuela is in the midst of an economic crisis and increasing political polarization. Government policies have signaled a move away from a democratic period towards authoritarianism. In recent years, the Venezuelan government has begun to crack down on political dissent, particularly in the media. In its 2016 annual report, Freedom House scored Venezuela with a 35, earning the designation of Partly Free.<sup>50</sup>

Cuba (Autocracy): Even before the Cuban revolution in the 1950s, the Cuban people were intimately acquainted with authoritarianism – the government of Fulgencio Batista was brutally repressive. The Cuban revolution sought to provide the people with basic dignities but did so at the expense of civil liberties. A one-party state, there is no visible opposition to the Communist Party of Cuba. the Castro regime has fiercely cracked down on civil liberties,

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<sup>49</sup> Table of Scores - Freedom in the World. (2016).

<sup>50</sup> Table of Scores - Freedom in the World. (2016).

particularly freedoms of speech and press. Of the three case studies, Cuba unsurprisingly achieved the lowest Freedom House score: a low 15. This designates the country as Not Free.<sup>51</sup>

These were chosen for a specific set of commonalities. First, all three countries were subjected to colonial rule and fought wars of independence to liberate them from a European power. Second, Venezuela and Cuba share both language, Spanish, and culture (although Venezuela is located in South America, it culturally identifies more with Hispanic-speaking Caribbean countries). Lastly, all three countries are located in the Western Hemisphere, specifically the Americas.

### Research methodology

The following research will be conducted partially through content analysis and partially through historical research.

For content analysis, this study will look at randomly selected pieces of satire produced within a five-year period (January 2012 – December 2016). These samples will be as representative as possible of the kind of political satire present within each country. In the United States, samples were chosen because of their prevalence in U.S. media, as well as the size and the scope of their audience. For example, *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central is not only explicitly satirical but also a staple of U.S. political satire. On the other hand, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* are two of the most widely circulated newspapers nationwide – therefore their editorial cartoons reach massive audiences.

In the case of Venezuela, samples reflect the most well-known and established of political satirists within the country. Satirists such as Laureano Márquez and cartoonists like Pedro León Zapata have had careers spanning multiple decades. Other sources of satire, such as

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

the website *El Chigüire Bipolar*, have proven to be hugely popular amongst audiences: episodes of their web cartoon *La Isla Presidencial* have garnered hundreds of thousands of views, while some have over a million.

Samples of endogenous Cuban satire, on the other hand, were difficult to assemble. These are primarily reflective of what could be found through extensive online searches. Considering that the island has highly restricted internet access, this sample might be the least representative of the three. However, it does serve to illustrate Cuban censorship and the space within which satire can operate.

These purposefully stratified samples will be composed of examples from varied forms of media: websites, television, and print. By using the following ranking, which establishes the qualities of the most critical to least critical pieces of satire, this paper will attribute a score to each piece of country.

To determine the type of censorship prevalent in that country, this study will require historical research to identify instances of censorship of satirists. In the case of social censorship, it will identify major themes considered taboo in that society.

Ultimately, the goal is to combine these sets of information in order to assess the nature of political satire under each regime type.

Measures	
<i>Rating</i>	<i>How openly critical?</i>
1	Alludes to themes and topics that are political – easily mistaken for anything else.
2	Refers to political actors through veiled allusions: metaphors, nicknames, parody.
3	Refers to political topics but does not mention specific actors. May target minor political actors.
4	Calls out specific political actors: politicians, government offices, specific government policies.

5	Same as above but includes a call to action. In other words, political satirists become political actors.
<i>Category</i>	<i>Types of censorship</i>
State-sponsored	Explicit government efforts to undermine, restrict, or overtake the free press.
Social	Societal constraints or taboos that limit the exercise of the free press

### Confounding variables and limitations

Of course, there are limitations that might affect the results, or confounding variables that might also explain the results.

The inability to conduct on-site research can hinder the ability to accurately gauge the nature of political satire in a country. In Venezuela, *humoristas* often present their content through stand-up comedy in shows all over the country. Outside of Cuba, it is difficult to understand how humor works within a country with such poor internet access. As a researcher, it will only be possible include the online recordings of these in qualitative data, which might result in an incomplete picture of satire within Venezuela.

Technology is another factor. The island of Cuba and its inhabitants have restricted access to the internet, yet the majority of the samples in the study will be procured using an online search. Particularly in the case of Cuba, satire produced by Cubans living off-the-island might be more easily accessible yet not representative of satire within the country itself.

A country's economy is also capable of influencing satire. By having the world's largest GDP, the United States will inherently have more satire and in more diverse forms. Venezuela and Cuba have struggling economies – Venezuela's newspapers, for example, struggle meet production demands due to a paper shortage.

## CASE STUDY: POLITICAL SATIRE IN THE U.S.

**Introduction**

Perfect democracies do not exist within the current international system, but the United States and the United Kingdom are its closest approximations.<sup>52</sup> Despite a checkered past which includes but is not limited to slavery, these are widely regarded as the most stable and long-lasting of democracies on the planet. The United States, in particular, has a long history of political satire, which goes back to the very founding of that nation. U.S. satirists have been mocking the government and its members as far back as the Revolutionary War, with Benjamin Franklin himself publishing essays deriding the British rule. Since then, U.S. satirists have had a tradition of subjecting its current president to some form of ridicule. As technology advanced, this coverage became not only varied in form but increasingly accessible and increasingly relentless. This seems to reach an apogee with President George W. Bush's administration when very little was sacred.<sup>53</sup>

This is not to say that there is no censorship whatsoever in democratic societies. Though the United States Constitution does guarantee the freedom of the press and only curtails that freedom under very specific circumstances, there does exist a form of covert censorship. Rather than censorship coming directly from the regime, satirists within democracies often find themselves conceding defeat to societal norms. Social censorship dictates that within democratic societies, there are deeply ingrained taboos that not even the most audacious satirist would brave public backlash for.<sup>54</sup> In the U.S., these taboos include topics such as wars, terrorism, religion, and race. For example, no satirist would dare to make a joke regarding 9/11 in the immediate

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<sup>52</sup> Freedman, *The Offensive Art*, 2009

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

aftermath. However, there is a precedent for taboos changing or diminishing over time. When John F. Kennedy was president in the 1960s, no satirist dared to mock his extra-marital affairs; much unlike the Clinton administration of the 1990s, when satirists delighted in the opportunity to ridicule the president for his affair with Ms. Monica Lewinsky.<sup>55</sup>

Because of the United States' sheer volume of inhabitants and the size of its media industry, this is not an in-depth analysis of every single political satirist within the country. Simply put, there is too much political satire and there are too many political satirists for every single voice to be heard within one academic paper.

### **Sample Analysis**

#### How openly critical?

##### *The Colbert Report*

Airing four nights a week from October 2005 to December 2014, *The Colbert Report* remained a staple of American political satire. According to the Comedy Central website, "As America's most fearless purveyor of 'truthiness,' Stephen Colbert shined a light on ego-driven punditry, moral hypocrisy, and government incompetence, raising the bar for political satire."<sup>56</sup> The show's format followed the news satire genre, mocking primarily current events, and purposefully imitated conservative political talk shows like *The O'Reilly Factor*. Colbert starred as the show's well-intentioned but poorly informed fictional anchorman, Stephen Colbert, whose over-inflated ego and "hyper-Americanism" were two of the show's running gags. *The Colbert Report* scored a 3.8 in regards to its openly critical format.

The show not only addresses political topics but often names specific politicians and government institutions while referencing the current events it mocks. In the first episode within

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<sup>55</sup> Freedman, *The Offensive Art*, 2009

<sup>56</sup> Comedy Central. (2017). *The Colbert Report*.

the sample, which aired March 15, 2012, Colbert mocked radio host Rush Limbaugh for his controversial statements about Georgetown University student Sandra Fluke who advocated in favor of contraceptives. Limbaugh then called Ms. Fluke a “slut” and a “prostitute”, which resulted in a media storm that cost Limbaugh several of his sponsors.<sup>57</sup> These sponsors included the U.S. Army, which prompted Colbert to mockingly exclaim, “The Army is pulling out of Rush.” Colbert followed this up with a slew of comments highlighting Limbaugh’s sexism, for example:

Limbaugh (from a radio show clip):

“How can I be anti-women? I’m a judge on the Miss America pageant!”

Colbert (on *The Colbert Report*):

“Yes! What more does he have to do? Judge Playmate of the Year?”<sup>58</sup>

The show not only quotes Limbaugh and mentions him by name, but includes his image and taped recordings of him speaking. Additionally, Colbert wraps up the segment with a slew of video clips featuring conservative media outlets and personalities like Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly claiming that Ms. Fluke’s statements were orchestrated by the Obama administration. A claim to which Colbert retorted: “Oh yes, she was run by powerful people – she’s a pawn! I mean, what’s the alternative? That a 30-year-old woman had her own thoughts and feelings about reproductive rights? Come on, what do you take me for? A girl?”<sup>59</sup>

*The Colbert Report* did not shy away from targeting the Executive Branch and its policies. In the second sample episode, which aired days after it was reported that a high-ranking Al-Qaeda operative was killed in an air-strike, Colbert mocks what he calls the “President’s

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<sup>57</sup> Bingham, A. (2012, March 4). Sponsors Pull Ads From Rush Limbaugh’s Radio Show Over ‘Slut’ Comments.

<sup>58</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, March 15). *The Colbert Report*: Rush Limbaugh Loses More Sponsors.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

righteous kill spree.”<sup>60</sup> He proposes that, because President Obama found it impossible to fulfill his promise of shutting down Guantanamo Bay, he now chooses to send them to their maker, “rather than Gitmo.” The only problem? Drone strikes have a track record of also killing civilians. “But you know that they say,” Colbert preaches. “To make an omelet, you have to kill a few civilians.”<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, the show specifically addressed the ambiguous moral reasoning the administration used to defend these deaths. “It is comforting to know that the administration has set the standard at the very high bar of killing the right person,” Colbert commented on the statement released by counterterrorism advisor John Brennan, as the screen behind him flashes ‘Higher Standard Than Texas’.<sup>62</sup> He proceeded to mock the “baseball card method” by which the president determines the next drone strike target, as well as the logic used to reduce the number of civilian casualties. Apparently, all military-aged males are considered combatants by virtue of physical proximity to Al-Qaeda. “The same way anyone at Comic-Con is probably a virgin.,” quirked Colbert.<sup>63</sup>

*The Colbert Report* did not limit its criticisms to political actors – it also found aims them at members of the media. His favorite target? Fox News conservative political commentator Bill O’Reilly, host of *The O’Reilly Factor*. In the episode which aired on May 1, 2014, Colbert not only mocked O’Reilly’s show on the air but had his cast and crew develop an entire parody of the segment “Watters’ World.” In the original “Watters’ World”, *The O’Reilly Factor* correspondent Jesse Watters hits the streets in order to highlight the ignorance of American

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<sup>60</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, May 31). *The Colbert Report*: Barack Obama’s Righteous Drone Strikes.

<sup>61</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, May 31). *The Colbert Report*: Barack Obama’s Righteous Drone Strikes.

<sup>62</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, May 31). *The Colbert Report*: The Word - Two Birds With One Drone.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

millennials. The entire segment is a bizarre editing feat. To quote Colbert, “(It) blends investigative journalism and smash cuts.”<sup>64</sup>

In Colbert’s parody sketch, also alliteratively titled “Tad’s Turf”, The Colbert Report’s laughably unqualified building manager similarly sets out to find these ignorant youths. Instead, he the students he encounters on the Columbia University are, unsurprisingly, able to identify the pictures of world leaders that Tad shows them (even Joe Biden with a mustache). The intent is clear: turn the original joke on its head. Rather than have an ignorant American youth, expose an out-of-touch conservative media willing to use shoddy reporting to prove their point.<sup>65</sup>

Other press-directed criticisms within this episode include CNN’s anti-climatic 24/7 coverage of the disappeared Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. Much like the build-up CNN created on-air about an incoming report from the Malaysian government, *The Colbert Report* used a montage of video footage of CNN reports to reemphasize the absurdity of journalists repeatedly refreshing their text and email inboxes (“any minute now”).<sup>66</sup> However, the highly anticipated report only contained the information that the Malaysian government also had nothing to report. The headline flashed behind Colbert: “Breaking news: nothing to report.”<sup>67</sup>

Despite *The Colbert Report* samples scoring an average of 3.8, it is important to note that other the show has certainly garnered a 5 in other instances. In 2007, Stephen Colbert announced his intent to run for president in the 2008 presidential election. His bid to run on both Democratic and Republican ballots came to an end when the Republican Party ballot resulted as too

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<sup>64</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2014, May 1). *The Colbert Report*: “Watters’ World”.

<sup>65</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2014, May 1). *The Colbert Report*: “Watters’ World” - Tad’s Turf.

<sup>66</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2014, May 1). *The Colbert Report*: CNN’s Endless Wait for Flight 370 News.

<sup>67</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2014, May 1). *The Colbert Report*: CNN’s Endless Wait for Flight 370 News.

expensive (\$35,000) and the Democratic Party turned down his application.<sup>68</sup> In 2011, Colbert created the Colbert Super PAC, previously known as Making America Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow, which ran several satirical political ads endorsing candidate Rick Perry.<sup>69</sup> After transferring power over his 501(c)(4) organization. Colbert then announced his intention to run for president in the 2012 election. However, timing was too late for his name to be added to the South Carolina primary ballot, his native state. Afterwards, Colbert declared he was no longer interested in becoming “President of the United States of South Carolina.”<sup>70</sup>

### *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*

If *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* bear any similarities to each other, it is because the latter is essentially a spin-off of the former. Stephen Colbert first curated his eponymous character as a cast member on *The Daily Show*. His show also borrows heavily from *The Daily Show*'s distinctive newscast styles. Premiering in 1999 with Jon Stewart at the helm, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* graced American airwaves for over two decades. During that period, “Stewart and The Best F#@king News Team Ever covered the day’s top stories like no one, using footage, field reports, and guest interviews to deliver fake news that was even better than the real thing.”<sup>71</sup> Its comedic approach to current events, not just politics, eventually garnered critical acclaim and won the show multiple two Peabody Awards, multiple Emmys, and even a Grammy. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* scored an average of 4 in terms of how openly critical is its content.

*The Daily Show* covered all of the most important political events as well as the most overlooked, like the 2012 Vice Presidential Debate – which the show renames “Battle for the

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<sup>68</sup> Seelye, K. (2007, November 2). Colbert’s Presidential Bid Ends After a ‘No’ in South Carolina. *The New York Times*.

<sup>69</sup> Sands, G. (2011, October 8). VIDEO: Colbert launches first super PAC ad.

<sup>70</sup> Montopoli, B. (2011, January 13). Stephen Colbert isn’t really running for president.

<sup>71</sup> Comedy Central. (2017). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

Historical Footnote.”<sup>72</sup> As a part of their series covering the election, titled “Democalypse 2012”, Stewart analyzes the performance of both vice presidential candidates. Acting Vice President Joe Biden was the first to receive the brunt of Stewart’s wit. Although Biden’s performance at the debate was a success considering President Obama’s own lackluster performance (also known as “[w]hen the ghost of Barack Obama debated Mitt Romney”<sup>73</sup>), Stewart expressed near-genuine surprise: “Who are you and what have you done with crazy Joe Biden?”<sup>74</sup> Described as “lovable [and] gaffe-tastic”, the idea of Biden could be a competent debater was laughably unexpected to *The Daily Show*.

Stewart’s show did not limit itself to commenting on the actual event, it also lampooned the media coverage following it. The Daily Show compiled video footage of Fox News anchors and guest commentators criticizing Biden’s performance. One notable clip was of the former vice presidential candidate and former governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin. Palin, whose reputation is a source of both contention and humor amongst the U.S. public<sup>75</sup>, was heavily derided by Stewart for describing Biden as a “musk ox running across the tundra” (“Settle down, Eskimo Annie Oakley.”<sup>76</sup>) *The Daily Show* is unequivocally critiquing biased conservative media coverage, particularly for describing Biden as sexually unappealing. Moments like these are when Stewart’s own liberal leanings show through:

“Yeah fellas: if you’re goin’ a-courtin’ and you want to turn off a woman, act like Biden. Of course, if you’re looking to keep women alive and healthy, you might

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<sup>72</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, October 15). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Democalypse 2012 - V.P. Debate: Battle for the Historical Footnote*.

<sup>73</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, October 15). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Democalypse 2012 - V.P. Debate: Battle for the Historical Footnote - Joe Biden*.

<sup>74</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, October 15). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Democalypse 2012 - V.P. Debate: Battle for the Historical Footnote*.

<sup>75</sup> Gross, M. J. (2010, October). Sarah Palin: The Sound and The Fury.

<sup>76</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, October 15). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Democalypse 2012 - V.P. Debate: Battle for the Historical Footnote - Joe Biden*.

want to focus more on what he was saying vis-à-vis health insurance and Medicare – not that politeness doesn't count.”<sup>77</sup>

*The Daily Show* did not only target individual's, but also government policy. After CIA Director's John Brennan defended the United States' controversial legal interpretation of torture, Jon Stewart turned his attention towards a Bush-era politician closely associated with the policy. In a follow-up interview, former Vice President Dick Cheney gave his own justification for U.S. use of enhanced interrogation tactics and his own definition of torture.<sup>78</sup> *The Daily Show* ridiculed this interview almost line by line, with Stewart honing in on Cheney's insistence that torture was the suffering felt by the United States during 9/11 (“Setting this nation's moral bar at anything incrementally better than the most despicable thing that has ever been done to us”).<sup>79</sup> Stewart is also shown to be critical of the moral implications of the policy itself by claiming, “[W]e have always been a nation that has followed the vigilante's code – sorry, rule of law.”<sup>80</sup> The host ends on a sarcastic note, clearly intended to insult Cheney: “I going to end on a note of gratitude, something I never thought I would say: George W. Bush, thank you for not dying in office.”<sup>81</sup>

Similar to Stephen Colbert, other instances of Jon Stewart's satirical work through *The Daily Show* earned a ranking of 5. In 2010, Stewart and Colbert hosted the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear. In contrast to Colbert's hyper-conservative alarmist alter-ego, Stewart implored the thousands of attendants to adhere to sanity and reasonableness. Although intended as humorous, the rally did provide a public forum for citizens to voice their concerns and shape

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2014, December 15). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Immoral Kombat*.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

the political narrative.<sup>82</sup> After Stephen Colbert announced his intentions to run for president in 2012, Jon Stewart was made temporary president of The Definitely Not Coordinating With Stephen Colbert Super PAC (as a way to illustrate the pitfalls of Citizens United).<sup>83</sup>

### *Saturday Night Live*

*Saturday Night Live* has been a staple on U.S. television sets since first broadcasting in 1975, entering its 42<sup>nd</sup> season in 2017.<sup>84</sup> Unlike the limited format of the news satire genre, *Saturday Night Live* is a variety show that featuring a series of comedic sketches. Although it does satirize pop culture, it is well known for parody skits that “influenc[e] the political dialogue while skewering it at the same time.”<sup>85</sup> One of those skits includes long-running “Weekend Update”, which paved the way for long-format news satire shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*. *Saturday Night Live* scored an average of 4 in terms of its openly critical content.

Although *Saturday Night Live* usually lacks the type of video footage that accompanies news satire, its parody sketches quite clearly single out politicians, government institutions, and government measures. Its writers utilize the cast members in such a way that it is unmistakable who and what they are mocking. For example, during the 2012 presidential election, *Saturday Night Live* aired a skit satirizing Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Titled “Mitt Romney Claims to Be Interested in Things He Isn’t”, cast member Jason Sudeikis impersonates Mitt Romney by adopting Romney’s style of speech, his style of dress, and even his style of hair. As Romney, Sudeikis claims to be willing to do anything to win the vote. He pretends to be a fan of Pittsburg sports team, a cockfighting enthusiast, an advocate of the Role Playing Game

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<sup>82</sup> Tavernise, S. & Stelter, B. (2010, October 30). At Rally, Thousands — Billions? — Respond.

<sup>83</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, January 17). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart: Colbert Super Pac - Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert*.

<sup>84</sup> NBC Universal. (2017). *Saturday Night Live*.

<sup>85</sup> NBC Universal. (2017). *Saturday Night Live*.

Association, and goes so far as to assert that if he had to have a chronic disease, diabetes would be his preferred choice.<sup>86</sup>

*Saturday Night Live* does not limit its criticisms to individuals either. In a parody of C-SPAN coverage of the controversial Benghazi hearings, the show's writers highlighted their perceived absurdity of the procedures. The sketch opens with Representatives Issa, Gowdy, and Cummings (played by Bill Hader, Taran Killam, and Kenan Thompson, respectively). Rep. Cummings is the lone Democrat amongst the three and serves as the voice of reason, decrying the entire affair to be a GOP-sponsored "partisan witch hunt" against then-President Obama and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.<sup>87</sup> Reps. Issa and Gowdy proceed to usher in ludicrous witnesses such as Jodi Arias, convicted murderer, and Ariel Castro, best known for holding three young women hostage in his basement for over the decade. *Saturday Night Live* pushes the boundaries of criticism when Jodi Arias incredulously asks the Republican members of the committee: "Well if you know who did it [then] why are you holding these meetings?"<sup>88</sup>

However, politics had never provided more fodder for satirists than during the 2016 presidential election. Following the release of a taped recording wherein Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, made extremely lewd comments about women, *Saturday Night Live* devoted two segments to satirizing the controversy. Firstly, in a parody sketch, writers depicted the vice presidential debate being interrupted by a CNN breaking news report and a subsequent interview with Trump. Cast member Alec Baldwin, known for his uncanny impersonation of Trump's mannerisms<sup>89</sup>, played Trump presenting fumbling excuses for behavior ("[W]hen I was just a young foolish 59-year-old man" and "I was trying to look cool in front of **the** Billy Bush")

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<sup>86</sup> NBC Universal (Producer). (2012, April 7). *Saturday Night Live*: Mitt Romney Claims to Be Interested in Things He Isn't.

<sup>87</sup> NBC Universal (Producer). (2013, May 11). *Saturday Night Live*: C-SPAN: Benghazi Hearings.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Sims, D. (2016, October 3). Alec Baldwin's Scariest, Nastiest Donald Trump.

interspersed with more sexist remarks (On fellow Republican Carly Fiorina: “She’s a four”). The segment ends with a nod to his rival, Hillary Clinton played by Kate McKinnon, who is depicted to be hosting a celebration at her campaign headquarters and struggles to keep a straight face while condemning Trump’s reprehensible comments.<sup>90</sup>

*New York Times*

Since 2001, *The International New York Times* has been publishing cartoons by graphic journalist Patrick Chappatte. Chappatte is an award-winning artist whose work usually revolves around international affairs, but who also lends his pen to draw political cartoons for one of the most widely circulated newspapers in the United States. In terms of audience, this form of political satire is consumed by millions not only within the U.S. but outside as well – the size of its readership alone makes *The New York Times* an important source of political satire. Overall, *The New York Times* scored a 3.6 for openly critical content.

Chappatte’s work ranges from satirizing specific individuals and institutions to referring to current events and political topics. The latter is best represented by the 2014 cartoon, “Income Inequality.” This cartoon critiques the lack of upward socioeconomic mobility felt by the lower class. As the caricature woman sardonically remarks: “... I went from unemployed to working poor.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the cartoon “Ferguson and race in America” refers to protests occurring in Ferguson, Missouri following the shooting of Michael Brown in August 2014. It clearly depicts the black man versus police narrative that gave birth to the controversial Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> NBC Universal (Producer). (2016, October 8). *Saturday Night Live: VP Debate Cold Open*.

<sup>91</sup> Chappatte, P. (Cartoonist). (2014, February 1). “Income Inequality.”

<sup>92</sup> Chappatte, P. (Cartoonist). (2014, August 20). “Ferguson and race in America.”

Other cartoons, like the 2013 “To strike or not to strike,” satirize United States foreign policy. It is a clear statement on the ambivalence and uncertainty within the Obama administration in regards to its policy toward Syria.<sup>93</sup> The complicated Syrian civil war ignited public debate in the United States as to whether it should strike against Assad’s oppressive regime.

In his work “Donald Trump’s phone calls” published in December 2016, Chappatte depicts the newly elected President Donald Trump making a phone call to Taiwan. Taiwan’s current position within international relations is shaped by its antagonistic relationship with China, an important trading partner for the United States. Trump is illustrated as balancing the globe precariously on his toe, an ominous reference to his careless approach to a delicately balanced world order. Chappatte is unmistakable in his criticism: in his opinion, Donald Trump could have the world collapse over a single whim.

### *The Washington Post*

Tom Toles is a Pulitzer prize-winning editorial cartoonist who has illustrated for the *The Washington Post* since 2002.<sup>94</sup> Unlike his counterpart Chappette, Toles is a U.S. born illustrator and has been working within the U.S. for over thirty years. Although its readership is small than *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* has the distinction of operating within the U.S. capital. As a newspaper, it is also an emblem of freedom of speech: in the 1970s, *Post* reporters Bernstein and Woodward exposed the Watergate scandal that brought an end to the Nixon presidency. *The Washington Post* editorial cartoons scored an average of 3.6 in openly critical content.

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<sup>93</sup> Chappette, P. (Cartoonist). (2013, August 30). “To strike or not to strike?”

<sup>94</sup> Tom Toles. (2017). *The Washington Post*.

In “Film at 11”, Toles proves to be willing to tackle the contentious topic of discriminatory police violence towards black male. Published in August 2014, after the shooting of Michael Brown and the Ferguson riots, public opinion was divided over the role of racism in a supposedly post-racist United States. Toles exacerbates that tension by depicting a white couple watching a white newscaster with a white policeman in riot gear onscreen, all the while discussing issues pertaining to the U.S.’s black community. Toles even includes a dig at the National Rifle Association, a controversial non-profit who lobbies to protect the Second Amendment (adding an additional layer of complexity to an already widely-debated issue).

In another piece of political satire, Toles turns his attention toward the United States Congress and the bipartisan dynamics that render it ineffective. “The president proposes and Congress poses” depicts a military tank identified as Congress by both name and architecture, pompously declaring “Let us debate Syria with all the wisdom and pragmatism that we bring to every vital area of domestic and international policy decision-making and...”<sup>95</sup> Published in September 2013, it featured in *The Washington Post* during the lead-up to a Senate debate over the use of military force by the U.S. in the Syrian civil war. In the past half-decade, the United States Congress has been plagued by the inability of the dominant parties (Democrats and Republicans) to fully collaborate and/or compromise. As such, Congress is viewed as an ineffectual and overly-bureaucratic branch of government.

Lastly, Toles whimsically addresses the potentially dangerous oversight by the Secret Service regarding President Obama’s safety. In 2014, after a series of security breaches at the White House, Julia Pearson resigned as the Director of the United States Secret Service. To poke

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<sup>95</sup> Toles, T. (Cartoonist). (2013, September 4). “Drone attack.”

fun at the federal law enforcement agency, Toles depicted a Secret Service agent reading “Have you seen this president?” The piece is titled “He Doesn’t Think So.”<sup>96</sup>

### *Townhall*

*Townhall* is both a website and print magazine which aligns as politically conservative. Previously published by the Heritage Foundation, it is now under the ownership and control of Salem Communications which targets “audiences interested in Christian and family-themed content and conservative values.”<sup>97</sup> The website not only publishes numerous articles by conservative political analysts and pundits but additionally curates a collection of editorial cartoons by a variety of satirists. Rather than exist solely in print form, the conservative-leaning public can find multiple sources of satire on one platform (which then can be shared through social media). These cartoons garnered an overall score of 3.8 when rated for openly critical content.

These cartoonists directly target the executive branch of government in multiple instances throughout the samples, despite being of the political opposition. In a cartoon published December 29, 2015, Henry Payne depicts two working-class men in “Coaltown, USA” sitting in front of a poster of former President Obama. The poster reads, “Obama: We had to destroy this town to save a Marshall Islands from submerging from global warming in 2060.”<sup>98</sup> Not only is it critical of the president, but it directs sardonic humor towards one of Obama’s most controversial causes: climate change. The debate amongst conservatives over whether climate change is even real and discontent over sacrificing short-term profits over long-term benefits is clearly demonstrated by Payne, whose illustration clearly condemns Obama’s policies.

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<sup>96</sup> Toles, T. (Cartoonist). (2014, October 2). “Have you seen this president?”

<sup>97</sup> About Us. (2017). *Salem Media Group*.

<sup>98</sup> Payne, H. (Cartoonist). (2015, December 29). “Coaltown. USA.”

Former President Obama was often a target for ridicule during his presidency. In a 2014 cartoon, illustrated by Michael Ramirez, the artist clearly mocks the presidential response following the 2012 Benghazi attack and its attitude toward prosecuting those the artist considered responsible. “We’re NOT GOING to send the CAPTURED SUSPECT to GITMO. But we are going to CHARGE HIM... A HEFTY FINE for NOT RETURNING THE BENGHAZI VIDEO...,” wrote Ramirez, intentionally sarcastic.<sup>99</sup>

In another cartoon, illustrator Robert Ariail chooses to target the 2016 presidential election and its Democratic primary candidates: Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton. The cartoon, which features Sanders as a literal tree, refers to the incredible unwillingness of some Bernie supporters transfer their allegiance to the Democratic primary victor, Hillary Clinton.<sup>100</sup> Bernie Sanders, who surprisingly emerged as a popular candidate amongst young Democrats, was at the center of what he called a “political revolution” – a sociopolitical movement spearheaded by his supporters.<sup>101</sup> Ariail clearly uses the phrase “The Sanders ‘Movement’” ironically: according to this cartoonist, Sanders is not going anywhere any time soon.

### *The Onion*

*The Onion* has the distinction of being a print form that translated into an online news satire page upon the advent of the Internet age. Publishing articles almost daily, *The Onion* takes on any range of topics from current events to pop culture. These articles are well-known for their headlines, which range from the absurd to the almost offensive.<sup>102</sup> As a source of U.S. satire, *The Onion* is one of the most well-established: beginning as a weekly publication in 1988, *The Onion* has achieved widespread popularity amongst liberals as a satirical news site (on Facebook, the

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<sup>99</sup> Ramirez, M. (Cartoonist). (2014, June 19). “Thursday, June 19, 2014.”

<sup>100</sup> Ariail, R. (Cartoonist). (2016, June 12). “The Sanders ‘Movement’”

<sup>101</sup> Sanders, B. (2016, June 16). *The Political Revolution Continues*.

<sup>102</sup> Dionne, A. (1999, January 8). “The Onion” moves to the Internet

official page has over 6 million likes). Its sardonic news pieces earned a score of 4 in terms of being openly critical.

No topic is seemingly too minor for *The Onion*. In February 2015, *The Onion* published a satirical fake news piece titled, “New Education Initiative Replaces K-12 Curriculum with Single Standardized Test.”<sup>103</sup> It intentionally mocks the Department of Education’s policies, as well as Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The piece alleged that the department would do away with the entire K-12 curriculum and replace all 13 years of schooling with a single, absurdly complex standardize test.

“Jeff Escudero, a 10-year-old from Winamac, IN who plans to take the test and hopefully complete his primary and secondary education next month, admitted to reporters that the new standardized exam was a source of stress for him.

‘There’s a lot riding on this,’ Escudero said. ‘Still, I think I’m pretty set. I just have to learn the periodic table, be able to explain what triangular trade is, and remember that it goes egg, larva, pupa, butterfly. It’ll be hard answering all those questions about *Richard III* and the New Deal, but at least I’ve already got the numbers up to 20 totally memorized. And once I’m done with the test, I won’t have to go to school anymore.’”<sup>104</sup>

Rather than mock a real political event, *The Onion* prefers to invent such a sensationally ridiculous piece in order to criticize the current education system and its potential overdependence on standardize testing.

*The Onion* also finds source material within the administration itself. “Obama’s Plan for Fighting Extremism” directly satirizes the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism. Of the Obama administration’s plans, *The Onion* summarily described these in dismissive terms. It includes absurd suggestions such as: “To better understand methods of recruitment, each world leader to undergo full process of radicalization,” and “Increase production and exportation of

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<sup>103</sup> New Education Initiative Replaces K-12 Curriculum with Single Standardized Test. (2015, February 19).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

American flags by 25 percent.”<sup>105</sup> Other suggestions are direct criticisms of President Obama’s strategy at the time. “Only prop up those rebel militias we’re fairly certain won’t turn on us one day” and “Partner with local paranoid bigots to recognize early stages of extremism” not only reference to U.S. arming moderate Syrian rebels, but also previous U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The article concludes that the best solution might just be to “Give things another 2,000 years to simmer down.”<sup>106</sup>

This is not to say that *The Onion* exclusively deals in fictitious or minor events. Following the results of the 2016 presidential election, *The Onion* released a series of articles with increasing ludicrous headlines and/or content. For example, “Media Outlets Pledge Evenhanded Criticism of Trump, Clinton Over Next 4 Years” is the fabricated report that straightforwardly criticizes mainstream U.S. media’s obsession with the Clinton e-mail scandal – a shadow Hillary Clinton was never able to shake from her campaign. “‘...The nation can continue to count on us for fair, equitable reporting on the most important political developments.’ At press time, members of the media were already diligently researching what effect Clinton’s email scandal might have on Trump’s foreign policy.”<sup>107</sup>

Other headlines for the day suggest the moral conundrum *The Onion* perceived in electing Donald Trump to the highest executive office in the nation: “Report: It Still Nowhere Near Okay To Act Like Donald Trump.”<sup>108</sup> Similarly, “What Lessons America Can Learn From This Election Cycle” is a satirical piece that reveals the uncomfortable truths facing U.S. society

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<sup>105</sup> New Education Initiative Replaces K-12 Curriculum with Single Standardized Test. (2015, February 19).

<sup>106</sup> Obama’s Plan for Fighting Extremism. (2015, February 19).

<sup>107</sup> Media Outlets Pledge Evenhanded Criticism of Trump, Clinton Over Next 4 Years. (2016, November 10).

<sup>108</sup> Report: It Still Nowhere Near Okay to Act Like Donald Trump. (2016, November 10).

after the election.<sup>109</sup> Some of these include: “There’s a slight chance America is not yet a post-racial society” (in reference to President Trump’s offensive rhetoric toward blacks, minorities, and immigrants) and “Americans have a great capacity for forgiveness when it comes to sexual assault” (in reference to the lewd comments made by Donald Trump that blurred the lines of sexual consent).<sup>110</sup> However, the impact of these less humorous statements was still mitigated by the less witty, yet more comical: “Your father/son/brother/mother/daughter/uncle/aunt is a fucking moron.”<sup>111</sup>

### *The Salty Tusk*

*The Salty Tusk* advertises itself as “a site devoted to sharing the best conservative humor on the internet.”<sup>112</sup> The website’s content is user-generated: website members are permitted to create and upload jokes, cartoons, images, or videos that are then circulated through social media. Its titles often contain hashtags and its articles (which are more likely short memes) are created under the veil of online usernames. The site’s format and departure from traditional sources of political satire are reflective of its age: *The Salty Tusk*’s online archive only goes as far back as December 2015. Although young, *The Salty Tusk* was an incredibly active page throughout the entirety of the 2016 presidential election. The political satire on *The Salty Tusk* merited a score of 3.8 for openly critical content.

*The Salty Tusk* often targets high-ranking member of the Democratic Party and the Obama administration and its policies, without fear of repercussion. In one post, a *Salty Tusk* user uploaded a manipulated image of Democrats outfitted in prison jumpsuits with a “prison

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<sup>109</sup> What Lessons America Can Learn from This Election Cycle (2016, November 10).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> What Is The Salty Tusk? (2017). *The Salty Tusk*.

bus” behind them.<sup>113</sup> The title was “@SaltyTusk Plan to Make America Great Again!” and incarcerating former President Obama, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and former Attorney General Eric Holder would be the first step. This post resonates as the kind of viral image that circulated rampantly through social media during the 2016 presidential election, feeding off of bipartisan antagonism.

Similarly, *The Salty Tusk* had no compunction in targeting controversial issues, such as the desecration of the United States flag as a form of protest. As the public became increasingly politically active throughout the 2016 presidential election, debate surrounding appropriate forms of protest became incensed. This followed football quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s refusal to stand at attention for the national anthem and justifying that, ““I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.””<sup>114</sup> In response, *The Salty Tusk* published a meme mocking flag protesters, who they equated with politically liberal individuals, and claimed “Careful with that flag son. Obamacare don’t cover no ass whippin.”<sup>115</sup>

The meme itself illuminates the authors behind the satire published on *The Salty Tusk*. Unlike satire associated with established comedians, users on *The Salty Tusk* can upload content that goes through no editorial filter. Instead, these articles, comics, and memes (primarily memes) are published even with intentional or unintentional misspellings. Additionally, its title references the Democratic Party as the “Blame America First Party.”<sup>116</sup> In doing so, the author reveals not only the rising sense of defensive nationalism sweeping through the country but also

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<sup>113</sup> Salty Peanuts. (2016, March 24). @SaltyTusk Plan To Make America Great Again!

<sup>114</sup> Wyche, S. (2016, August 27). Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during national anthem.

<sup>115</sup> Salty Peanuts. (2016, May 13). A Message to Flag Burners And The Blame America First Party...

<sup>116</sup> Salty Peanuts. (2016, May 13). A Message to Flag Burners And The Blame America First Party...

his or her criticism of the Democratic Party's perceived willingness to blame the United States for socioeconomic and political issues.

*How broad is the spectrum of targets?*

Overall, political satire targets both ends of the political ideology spectrum, which runs from conservative to liberal. However, there exists a clearly identifiable trend: for the most part, satirists choose to satirize those who hold an opposing view. Media outlets and websites that identify as conservative are more likely to publish content criticizing politically liberal politicians, policies, governments, and even their supporters. The same tendency can be found in politically liberal sources of satire, who continually lampoon not only conservative political actors but also conservative news sources.<sup>117</sup>

This is not to say that satirists find it impossible to criticize governments and politicians whose political views resemble theirs. Although their criticisms are certainly not as scathing as when directed at the opposing side, they do take the time to mock and ridicule their own. This worked best when showcasing the U.S. government's struggle to achieve bipartisan cooperation. SNL's skit, "A Drink at the White House", best illustrates this strength. After midterm elections in 2014, President Obama (Democrat) found himself in the inconvenient position of having Mitch McConnell as his Senate Majority Leader (Republican). In this sketch, actors dressed to imitate the two politicians bond while drinking themselves silly at the White House. Alongside all of the funny hijinks, SNL writers included a line that rings true in the context of U.S. politics: "I guess there's nothing getting done in the next two years."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Stelter, B. (2010, April 23). Jon Stewart's Punching Bag, Fox News.

<sup>118</sup> NBC Universal (Producer). (2014, November 15). *Saturday Night Live: A Drink at the White House*.

However, the most visually impactful of satire forms is the one that tends to target conservatives. Television is the medium tends to fall on the politically liberal spectrum. In the majority of T.V. samples examined within this study, the targets of satire were primarily conservative. It is almost inescapable: for example, *The Colbert Report* is a show entirely formatted to parody Bill O'Reilly's *The O'Reilly Factor*, a conservative political commentary show. Even media itself begins to question this phenomenon. In an article titled "Waiting for the Conservative Jon Stewart", the author surmises why televised political satire lacks its own equivalent to *The Daily Show*.<sup>119</sup> He points out that the extent of semi-successful conservative political humor on T.V. can be found in brief segments like Dennis Miller's on *The O'Reilly Factor*. Televised conservative humor, according to the author, struggles to find an audience in the United States, unlike its radio counterpart.<sup>120</sup>

#### What type of censorship?

In the United States, where freedoms of speech and press are protected by the First Amendment and restrictions are minimal,<sup>121</sup> state-sponsored censorship is not a predominant issue. According to *Freedom House*, the United States press and internet are rated as "free".<sup>122</sup> Reporters Without Borders ranks the U.S. as number 41 in its 2016 World Press Freedom Index, noting that U.S. media freedom is only curtailed by "the government's war on whistleblowers who leak information about its surveillance activities, spying and foreign operations, especially those linked to counter-terrorism."<sup>123</sup> However, censorship, as it relates to political satire, is predominantly of the social kind.

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<sup>119</sup> Morrison, O. (2015, February 14). Waiting for the Conservative Jon Stewart.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> U.S. Const. am. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Freedom House. (2016). *Freedom of the Press Report: United States*.

<sup>123</sup> Reporters Without Borders. (2016, April 20). The United States ranks 41st in Reporters Without Borders 2016 World Press Freedom Index.

One humor taboo that remains firmly entrenched in U.S. audiences is jokes related to terrorist attacks, particularly those on U.S. soil or affecting U.S. citizens. In the case of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, *The Colbert Report* deviated from its usual satirical stance toward current events to seriously address the previous day's tragedy. In an emotional monolog, Colbert addressed the people of Boston, commending them for their strength, resolve, and heroism. The closest attempt at humor was Colbert scoffing at the idea that extremist bombers would be able to shake the unshakeable people of Boston, who withstood the Red Sox's "86-year losing streak."<sup>124</sup>

Nonetheless, the day immediately after, *The Colbert Report* rallied by airing a brief segment addressing the media hysteria: "But in Boston, 48 hours after the horrific tragedy, there has been a major breakthrough in the reporting of all the other things we don't know."<sup>125</sup> Colbert follows this statement with a series of video clips pulled from multiple news channels: CNN, MSNBC, Fox News. The rapid juxtaposition of contradicting statements effectively creates the impression of a bumbling news anchor attempting to create a story from nothing. Even members of the press are not protected from being lampooned by Colbert, who is unafraid to highlight the general incompetence of the press corps. At no point in this segment does Colbert attempt to satirize the victims, the emergency services, or even the bomber themselves.

Another humor landmine is religion. Jokes and criticisms surrounding religion and religious practices are delicate subjects for both satirists and audiences. Within the U.S., humor about Islam divides audiences, especially along liberal and conservative lines. In *The Daily Show*, during a segment where Stewart interviews author Ayaan Hirsi Ali on her controversial

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<sup>124</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2013, April 16). *The Colbert Report*: Intro - 4/16/13.

<sup>125</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2013, April 17). *The Colbert Report*: Ricin Letters & Boston Bombing Suspects.

book *Heretic*, Stewart figuratively dances around the subject of reforming Islam. Little to no jokes are made and the audience has the uncomfortable experience of watching Stewart rephrase his questions again and again. On her part, Ayaan Hirsi Ali struggles to answer Stewart's probing of her idea that there is something inherently wrong and in need of reformation within Islam.<sup>126</sup>

One relatively new taboo within U.S. audiences is the subject of mass shootings and gun violence. Although satirists are definitely willing to target lobbyists and politicians from both pro- and anti-gun control, no satirist makes jokes about Sandy Hook Elementary or the Pulse tragedy. Instead, some satirists adopt a moral tone: both condemning and mourning the kind of society that has engendered this type of violence. After the fatal shooting at Savannah State University, Tom Toles depicted a domino effect of firing guns with the following statistic: "We are currently averaging more than one mass shooting per day."<sup>127</sup> In the bottom right-hand corner, a small cartoon of Toles chimes in: "Someone could get hurt."<sup>128</sup>

On the other hand, the discussion surrounding race in the United States (particularly while under the Obama administration) reveals an evolution in the treatment of a formerly taboo subject. While still controversial, the United States has definitely moved past a time where blackface and minstrel shows were commonly accepted forms of humor and entertainment. Instead of jokes at the expense of black people, the tension surrounding race in a supposedly post-racial America almost seems to lend itself to humor.

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<sup>126</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2015, March 23). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*: Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

<sup>127</sup> Toles, T. (Cartoonist). (2015, August 8). "Someone could get hurt"

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

In “Dolly Parton”, Stewart was unafraid to tackle then-Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich’s controversial trip into the “bowels of the inner-city.”<sup>129</sup> In a bid to win over the diversity vote in South Carolina, Gingrich attempted to convince a Black community that he will be the next “paycheck president.”<sup>130</sup> After citing statistics that disprove the idea the food stamp recipients are either mostly people of color and/or unemployed, Stewart sarcastically remarked, “It may be unnecessary, perhaps, to lecture African-Americans on their work ethic.” This segment is accompanied not only by video footage of Gingrich, but also comically photoshopped images of his face: Newt Gingrich as “the King of Kwanzaa”, as well as Gingrich with an American flag background and underlying text that reads “Black to the Future.”<sup>131</sup> To further parody newscasts, the video editing then jumps to a split screen featuring *The Daily Show*’s Senior Political Analyst Wyatt Cenac. “I don’t know if that’s racist,” Cenac tells Stewart, reporting ‘live from Baltimore’. “That’s just Newt being condescending and d\*ckish – or as he calls it, ‘talking’.”<sup>132</sup>

### **Summary of Results**

The United States is quite predictable in how its political satire operates. In terms of how openly critical is U.S. political satire, the country overall scored a 5. Satirists are willing and able to call out specific political actors with no fear of persecution: addressing politicians, government offices, government policies, and political topics. They not only include the explicit names of these actors but also incorporate video footage and images of these. Satirists are not

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<sup>129</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, January 12). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*: Indecision 2012 - Black to the Future.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Comedy Central (Producer). (2012, January 12). *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*: Indecision 2012 - Black to the Future - Newt Gingrich’s Timing.

afraid to be considered disrespectful: they swear and make obscene jokes at the expense of these actors.

Furthermore, U.S. satirists are willing to go out and call for action. Although Colbert, Stewart, Toles, and their other colleagues primarily work as commentators – their humor sheds light on the hypocritical and absurd side of politics – but use their humor to engage their audiences in politics. Notably, they often invite individuals associated with politics onto their shows. Current President Donald Trump hosted *SNL* during his election campaign and former President Barack Obama had an entire *Colbert Report* episode dedicated to him (Obama was given the opportunity to take over a segment). Among the samples, Stewart's *Daily Show* had Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor come to the show for an interview. There are definitely some possible explanations for this strange intermingling between politics and satirists: either U.S. satirists are so unconcerned about their ability to operate freely even in the presence of politics, or politics has a greater hand in curbing and deciding which content is permissible.

Lastly, censorship in the United States takes the form of social censorship: societal constraints or taboos that limit the exercise of the free press and satirists. In the United States, terrorism and mass shootings remain taboo subjects for satirists, a violation of moral and social norms. There are subjects that while not entirely taboo are still handled delicately and can elicit public backlash, such as jokes pertaining to religion and specifically Islam. Surprisingly, discussions about race are not exactly taboo. Instead, the controversy surrounding race in the United States seems to feed humor as satirists hone in on gaffes, hypocrisy, and the controversial topic of police violence.

## CASE STUDY: POLITICAL SATIRE IN CUBA

### Introduction

Cuba is well-established as an authoritarian state, having never experienced a period of stable and continuous democracy since its Spanish colonization. In 1959, Fidel Castro took over the country's highest office after leading the Cuban Revolution to victory. Since then, the Castro regime has effectively worked to curtail personal freedoms and civil liberties – including freedoms of speech and press. In fact, “[t]he constitution prohibits private ownership of media outlets and allows free speech and journalism only if they ‘conform to the aims of a socialist society.’”<sup>133</sup> In Cuba, almost all traditional media is owned by the state, which controls the contents and the authors. Independent or critical Cuban journalists or bloggers are subject to persecution in the form of harassment or incarceration. This is the space within which Cuban satirists operate.

### Sample Analysis

#### How openly critical?

##### *Satire produced within Cuba*

Unlike other readily available sources of Cuban satire, the work of Luis Silva is actually produced and distributed within the country. *Vivir del Cuento* is a wildly popular TV show broadcasted by Cubavisión. Its title loosely translates to *Surviving by Your Wits* and it aims to depict daily life in Cuba – with a touch of humor. Luis Silva's character Pánfilo Epifanio is the show's breakout star: the 37-year-old comedian plays a 78-year-old retiree who is curmudgeonly but good-hearted. The show's subtle humor is well-received by Cuban viewers, who eagerly tune

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<sup>133</sup> Freedom House. (2016). *Freedom of the Press Report: Cuba*.

in every Monday night.<sup>134</sup> Recordings of *Vivir del Cuento* are also uploaded online for Cubans abroad to enjoy.

The most famous of recent episodes involves an unlikely guest star: former U.S. President Barack Obama. Prior to his historic visit to Havana, President Obama reached out to the show's star to ask about the opportunity to make a guest appearance. Two clips were recorded: one where Pánfilo accidentally phones Obama at the White House, another where Obama joins Pánfilo in his house to play dominoes.<sup>135</sup> Obama and Pánfilo joke in a mix of Spanish and English, including some sly puns. Obama, for example, requests to be picked up in an *almendrón* (a 1950s American car imported to Cuba) yet Pánfilo offers him a more modern option, a Moskovitch (Soviet cars produced until 1961).<sup>136</sup>

As they play dominoes, Pánfilo tries to play the 6-2 tile but finds himself “blocked”. It is an indirect reference to the 1962 embargo against Cuba by the United States, *bloqueo* being the Spanish-language term.<sup>137</sup> However, Pánfilo implies that, much like relations with the United States, some things are getting better and then plays the winning tile. After Obama leaves, Pánfilo starts: “I forgot to show him my ration card!”<sup>138</sup>

The ration card is an emblematic piece of *Vivir del Cuento*, claimed Luis Silva in an *Al Jazeera* documentary.<sup>139</sup> In the show, his character will pray to it, light a candle underneath it, or place a glass of water. It is just one more pointed dig at life in Cuba. The documentary also

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<sup>134</sup> Montgomery, D. (2016, May 1). Pánfilo, that Cuban comedian Obama joked with in Havana, pays a visit to Washington.

<sup>135</sup> Montgomery, D. (2016, May 1). Pánfilo, that Cuban comedian Obama joked with in Havana, pays a visit to Washington.

<sup>136</sup> Somanader, T. (2016, March 19). President Obama Gets a Phone Call from Pánfilo [Web log].

<sup>137</sup> Montgomery, D. (2016, May 1). Pánfilo, that Cuban comedian Obama joked with in Havana, pays a visit to Washington.

<sup>138</sup> [Noticias De Cuba Hoy]. (2016, March 23). *Pánfilo y Obama juegan dominó. Obama visita a Pánfilo en Cuba*. [Video file].

<sup>139</sup> [Al Jazeera English]. (2016, August 22). *My Cuba - Luis Silva: Being Panfilo*. [Video file].

provided a clip of Silva, in character as Pánfilo, doing stand-up comedy at a bar in Havana. His jokes were subtle but elicited uproarious laughter from the crowd. Pánfilo essentially criticized government practice of only showing foreign dignitaries the update parts of Havana: “They say President Obama’s car is so armored it’s nicknamed the Beast. Well, I’d like to see it take on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October [street name], I’d call some of those potholes pretty beastly.”<sup>140</sup>

Some of his jokes highlighted other struggles. On the subject of two new Zika virus cases diagnosed in Cuba, Silva joked: “[They say] both cases are imported from abroad... I thought jeez, everything you could import – a refrigerator, a TV – and you chose Zika? Damn.”<sup>141</sup>

His jokes rely primarily on that clever sense of humor, playing on words, double entendres, and the kind of humor only Cubans would understand. Silva’s best example was a skit from *Vivir del Cuento*. Often times when Cubans go to retrieve their designated ration, they’re presented with a substitute: a portion of chicken instead of the fish you were allotted. Similarly, Pánfilo and his friend Chequera go fishing at the pier. But instead of catching fish, they reel in chickens.<sup>142</sup> It is the type of joke that would seem like plain gag humor to viewers outside of Cuba, but Cuban viewers would understand it best.

Watching episodes of *Vivir del Cuento*, available online through video-sharing sites like YouTube, are a comparable experience. In the episode “El paquetero” (“The Packeter”), Facundo (a character who seems to represent a local government representative) is desperately trying to unearth the neighborhood packet trade.<sup>143</sup> The packet is, of course, a hard-drive loaded with multimedia content; it is an illegal solution to Cuba’s poor internet.<sup>144</sup> Facundo, however,

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<sup>140</sup> [Al Jazeera English]. (2016, August 22). *My Cuba - Luis Silva: Being Panfilo*. [Video file].

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> [Cubanos por el Mundo]. (2015, July 6). *Vivir del Cuento “El Paquetero” con Pánfilo y Chequera | Humor cubano. (6 de julio 2015)* [Video file].

<sup>144</sup> San Pedro, E. (2015, August 10). Cuban internet delivered weekly by hand.

does not even know what the packet contains, making up wild guesses from overheard conversations.

In “Ingles con barreras” (“English with barriers”), Pánfilo and his friend Chequera set up a scam of an English school for their friends in the neighborhood. Pánfilo, the reluctant teacher, only joins because his house is falling apart. Their attempts to teach English are laughable, as both students and teacher stumble through basic terms and phrases. It comes to a halt after the roof collapses mid-class. Facundo comes to the rescue with some friendly helpers but is dismayed to discover the scheme. Although funny, no joke throughout the show is explicitly political to the extent that a Spanish-speaking viewer unfamiliar with Cuban life can identify it.

Other episodes are also subtly critical. “Entorno” (or “Environment”) depicts Facundo’s attempt to solve the neighborhood’s environmental problems. His recycling initiative goes awry when two neighbors begin to steal the recycled trash. Nothing about the episode is explicitly critical: it names no political actors or government institutions. But its jokes suggest a double meaning that someone outside of Cuba would struggle to understand.

### *Satire produced outside of Cuba*

This is not to say that there isn’t an abundance of Cuban satire that operates in a space outside of Cuba. The country’s exiles and refugees, as well as their descendants, are responsible for a great bulk of the Cuban satire readily available today.

Some examples include *Guamá* by the cartoonist Alen Lauzán. The book itself is a compilation of the graphic works and texts published on his blog from 2008 to 2014.<sup>145</sup> It is a direct parody of the newspaper Granma, the slogan of which is: “Official Voice of The

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<sup>145</sup> Un libro del Guamá para tus ‘gusanas manos.’ (2016, May 1).

Communist Party of Cuba Central Committee.”<sup>146</sup> His work is much more explicitly critical, containing phrases like “Down with Fidel!” and utilizing images of high-ranking officials like the Castro brothers. Lauzán’s seemingly preferred form of parody is to replicate the Granma front page with either fictitious and/or satirical headlines. After the announcement of Fidel’s death, the *Guamá* front page was a picture of the young revolutionary with the headline, “The queen has died.”<sup>147</sup> Lauzán, who has resided in Chile for the past seventeen years,<sup>148</sup> is afforded all the protection that physical distance and the internet can provide.

Other sources of Cuban satire abroad include the satirical news site *El Lumpen* (which refers to the term lumpenproletariat, meaning disinterested in revolution).<sup>149</sup> Much like other satirical websites abroad, *El Lumpen* is populated with outrageous headlines and satirical articles. Unlike satire produced within Cuba, the website’s articles are much more openly critical. For example, quick searches on the web page reveal a multitude of pieces with tags like Fidel, Raúl, Díaz Canel, and Lazo (all high-ranking political actors). Headlines on the website read “Fidel and Raúl join the ‘Mannequin Challenge’ fever”<sup>150</sup> and “Fidel does not release a statement on Donald Trump because he says ‘he can’t believe it’”<sup>151</sup>.

### What type of censorship?

Cuba’s type of censorship is clearly state-sponsored censorship. The facts support this: freedom of expression is a jailable offense, the state monopolizes both print and broadcast media,

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<sup>146</sup> Who we are (2016, March 11).

<sup>147</sup> Lauzán, A. (2016, November 27). *Guamá* 498 [Web log].

<sup>148</sup> Soriagalvarro Neira, D. (2016, December 2). *El ilustrador Alen Lauzán y la muerte de Fidel: “Todavía hay mucha barba que cortar”*.

<sup>149</sup> Dávila Miguel, J. (2016, January 28). *La verdad del humor y la mentira. El Nuevo Herald*.

<sup>150</sup> Cuartel, S. (2016, November 22). *Fidel y Raúl se suman a la fiebre del “Manikin Challenge”*

<sup>151</sup> Cuartel, S. (2016, November 19). *Fidel no saca reflexión sobre Donald Trump porque dice “no se lo puede creer”*.

its citizen have little to no Internet access, and, finally, even that Internet access is censored.<sup>152</sup> Only 5% of Cubans enjoy internet access at home, while most others rely upon 40 government-approved hotspots within major cities (which is also the only places where they can access social media sites like Facebook and Twitter).<sup>153</sup> Cuba ranked #171 on the 2016 World Press Freedom Index<sup>154</sup> and unsurprisingly is considered Not Free by the organization Freedom House.<sup>155</sup> According to Reporters Without Borders:

“Fidel Castro’s death in 2016 effectively changed nothing. [...] Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, threats, smear campaigns, confiscation of equipment, and closure of websites are the most common forms of harassment. These practices are ubiquitous and are buttressed by an arsenal of restrictive laws.”<sup>156</sup>

Cuban satirists seem to operate within this same limited space. For example, after the death of Fidel Castro, comedic shows like *Vivir del Cuento* were taken off air for a month because the government prohibited any depictions of the deceased gentleman.<sup>157</sup> But Cuban satirists find ways to circumvent this legislation through witty humor disguised in double entendres and nicknames. Comedians will often indirectly refer to Fidel as *la barba* (the beard), which is a codename everyone in Havana understands.<sup>158</sup> More often than not, these comedians will depict the daily life and struggles of the average Cuban citizen – subtle satire that still remains permissible by the government.

However, there is a distinction to make about Cuban satire. Most Cuban political satire is produced outside of the country, in immigrant enclaves like Miami. There, exiles and refugees

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<sup>152</sup> Salomon, J. (2016, March 11). Six facts about censorship in Cuba.

<sup>153</sup> San Pedro, E. (2016, March 21). Cuba internet access still severely restricted.

<sup>154</sup> Reporters Without Borders. (2016, December 2). *Fidel Castro’s heritage: flagrant media freedom violations*.

<sup>155</sup> Freedom House. (2016). *Freedom of the Press Report: Cuba*.

<sup>156</sup> Reporters Without Borders. (2016, December 2). *Fidel Castro’s heritage: flagrant media freedom violations*.

<sup>157</sup> Aumenta la censura en Cuba tras la muerte de Fidel Castro (2016, December 28)

<sup>158</sup> Leon, H. (2017, February 17). Burlarse sin ser atrapado: así es la vida de los comediantes cubanos.

can enjoy unrestricted humor about political actors, government institutions, laws and policies, and even the economic suffering. But this humor is made by and primarily for people not living on the island.

Satire produced within Cuba for Cubans (particularly satire that can be researched without visiting the island) is much rarer. This is not to say Cubans living on the island are unaware of satire produced outside. With the introduction of *el paquete* (which is a small, contraband hard-drive manually delivered to each household that is loaded with multimedia),<sup>159</sup> Cubans are able to circumvent government restrictions on Internet access. But that type of satire does not truly represent how Cuban satire operates since it is created without the same fear of retaliation as Cuban satire produced within Cuba.

Although Cuba remains severely restricted by democratic standards, some Cuban satirists have recognized a change. According to Luis Silva, the creator of *Pánfilo*, the show *Vivir del Cuento* is able to address topics that have not been mentioned on Cuban TV in years.<sup>160</sup> This is why the show has become so wildly popular, with fans crowding around the filming areas and requesting pictures with the show's stars. "If it doesn't have social criticism, the people are disappointed," alleged another one of the show's writers, describing a hunger amongst the Cuban people for satire and criticism.<sup>161</sup> Its director also cited the relevance and timing of the show: immediately after something happens on the national stage, the show's writers are quick to satirize it on the following episode.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> San Pedro, E. (2015, August 10). Cuban internet delivered weekly by hand.

<sup>160</sup> [Al Jazeera English]. (2016, August 22). *My Cuba - Luis Silva: Being Panfilo*. [Video file].

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

Remarkably, Luis Silva alleges that Cuban officials had no input on the scripts for President Obama's guest appearance, displaying an uncharacteristic hands-off approach to media by the Cuban government.<sup>163</sup>

### **Summary of Results**

Overall, Cuban satire produced within the island earned a score of 1. Most satire produced within Cuba sticks to general themes or events but acknowledges them in ways that an unfamiliar viewer might easily overlook. If ever alluding to political actors, it uses veiled references: metaphors, nicknames, parody. At no point do Cuban satirists sit down to explicitly rail against government officials, institutions, legislation, or icons. Censorship within Cuba is state-sponsored and limited internet access severely curtails satirists' ability to operate. However, recently some satirists perceive an opening within that restricted space.

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<sup>163</sup> Montgomery, D. (2016, May 1). Pánfilo, that Cuban comedian Obama joked with in Havana, pays a visit to Washington.

## CASE STUDY: POLITICAL SATIRE IN VENEZUELA

**Introduction**

The closure of Radio Caracas Televisión brought an end to an era of openly critical Venezuelan television and, in a sense, political satire. Although satirists and government had occasionally sparred during the forty-year democratic period, political humor had remained a respected part of the media. Social criticism seemed to be welcome in a country that had long fought for democratic stability. However, as the Chávez (and later Maduro) administration began to encroach upon civil liberties such as freedom of the press, the role of satire in politics began to shift. Today, Venezuelan satirists seek not only to criticize but to shape the political landscape around them.

**Sample Analysis**How openly critical?*Laureano Márquez*

Laureano Márquez has been a staple in Venezuelan satire for over two decades. Initially working as both a writer and actor for *Radio Rochela* on the ill-fated television channel RCTV, Márquez then found his home in the theater in satirical plays. Currently, he is the author of a satirical column published in the newspaper *Tal Cual*.<sup>164</sup> Founded by former politician Teodoro Petkoff (who broke with his own socialist party over their support for Chávez), *Tal Cual*'s editorial line is both centre-left and often in opposition to the Venezuelan government.<sup>165</sup>

In his column, Márquez often criticizes the overall slow deterioration of the country: he cites the shortage of basic goods like food, medicines, and even toilet paper. In “Ley de Compraventa de Papel Tualé” (“Law for the Sale and Resale of Toilet Paper”), Márquez writes a

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<sup>164</sup> Márquez, L. (2017). *Biografía*.

<sup>165</sup> Zapata, J. C. (2001, April 3). Esto también es un negocio.

ludicrous fictitious bill regulating the use of new and used toilet paper: regulating amount, permissible uses, buyer authorization, and sanctions for violators.<sup>166</sup> In “Infierno Venezolano” (“Venezuelan Hell”), describes hell by essentially describing Venezuela. Shortages of basic goods and services: food, medicine, water, energy, education, and basic necessities like soap. Malnutrition and poor hygiene have resulted in a medical crisis the Venezuelan healthcare system is no longer equipped to handle: rampant disease, not enough access to birth control, and high infant mortality rates. Venezuelans, Márquez protests, do not earn enough money in their wages and what they do earn is a pittance due to hyperinflation, a symptom of the collapsing economy of an oil-dependent country in an oil crisis. “Even Dante Alighieri could not imagine this one,” writes Márquez.<sup>167</sup>

Aside from generally describing Venezuela’s crisis, Márquez is also critical of the political system as a whole. In one piece, Márquez describes the myriad of elections the Chávez and Maduro governments have used to maintain a thin veneer of democracy in a state that increasingly veers more authoritarian. “I’m not even sure who or what we’re electing anymore,” he gripes.<sup>168</sup> He additionally accuses the electoral system of being rife with corruption, opportunism, and fraud (“[E]ven though Carter might say the opposite”<sup>169</sup>). Similarly, after 2015 congressional elections (in which the opposition won two-thirds of the seats), Márquez wrote an article celebrating the victory, “¿Cómo te explico?” (“How can I explain?”). In it, he provides a “Democracy for dummies” explanation of democracy. He concludes: “When the people vote, in

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<sup>166</sup> Márquez, L. (2014, August 23). Ley de Compraventa de Papel Tualé.

<sup>167</sup> Márquez, L. (2016, February 13). El infierno venezolano.

<sup>168</sup> Márquez, L. (2012, December 12). Devoto del voto.

<sup>169</sup> Cárdenas, J. R. (2012, September 28). Jimmy Carter blesses Venezuelan election as fear of violence grows.

a democracy, nothing and no one is above that. I don't know if I explained myself? Ok. Here I go again.”<sup>170</sup>

As a satirist, Márquez is quick to point out the absurdity or hypocrisy of Venezuelan politics. His fictional situations often reflect the real-life hysteria promoted by the government and its leaders. President Maduro, for example, is quick to accuse his opposition of allying with the United States in an economic war against Venezuela.<sup>171</sup> In a piece titled “La MUD tiene una bomba atómica” (“The MUD has an atomic bomb”), Márquez describes a ludicrous scenario in which the opposition (known as the Democratic Unity Roundtable, which in Spanish abbreviates to MUD) has constructed a homemade ACME-brand atomic bomb to sabotage the government.<sup>172</sup> Unlike government politicians, Márquez freely names some of the most important opposition politicians such former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski and imprisoned Caracas mayor Antonio Ledezma.

In one of the only sample articles where Márquez explicitly names a government politician, “Esta FAO” (“This FAO”) highlights the sheer hypocrisy of president Maduro receiving a U.N. award for reducing hunger.<sup>173</sup> As the president of a country in the midst of a severe food shortage, Maduro receiving this prize is “[a]s if Human Rights Watch had given Pinochet an award for protecting human rights or as if FIFA had an ethics committee.”<sup>174</sup>

However, Márquez is also at times didactic with his audience. In 2014, after the opposition accepted to initiate dialogue with Maduro's government, Márquez wrote an article persuading his audience to keep an open mind.<sup>175</sup> Written as the transcription between Márquez

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<sup>170</sup> Márquez, L. (2015, December 19). ¿Cómo te explico?.

<sup>171</sup> Maduro dice que EEUU está al frente de la ‘guerra económica’ contra Venezuela. (2016, August 10).

<sup>172</sup> Márquez, L. (2013, June 14). La MUD tiene una bomba atómica.

<sup>173</sup> Márquez, L. (2015, June 5). Esta FAO.

<sup>174</sup> Márquez, L. (2015, June 5). Esta FAO.

<sup>175</sup> Márquez, L. (2014, November 11). *Diálogo*.

and a fellow opposition friend, the two debate de pros and cons of initiating dialogue with the other side. From the beginning, both are critical of the MUD: “What gives them the right to represent us? Have they done enough in this fight?” It serves to highlight the tensions amongst the opposition itself, its failed attempts to coordinate, and its relationship to the student movement, who has provided most of the groundwork for the opposition. Nonetheless, Márquez makes a case for the MUD. Give them a chance, he tells his audience, we need leadership and we need to negotiate. “With murderers?” asks his friend, referring to the government. “Isn’t that what happens every day in an express kidnapping?” Laureano concludes, alleging that, by now, Venezuelans are expert negotiators in even the direst of circumstances.

### *Emilio Lovera*

Another well-known character in Venezuelan satire is comedian Emilio Lovera. Known as the “man with a thousand faces”, Lovera is best known for his impersonations. Like his colleague Laureano Márquez, Lovera began working in *Radio Rochela* as both writer and actor. Lovera’s ability to imitate Chávez’s distinctive voice as well as a vague physical resemblance made him the perfect choice to play former president Chávez, his most controversial role on the show.<sup>176</sup> Since RCTV’s closure, Lovera has been engaged in a variety of comedic labor. However, in terms of political satire, his collaborations with Laureano Marquez and his voiceover work on satirical web cartoon, *La Isla Presidencial (The Presidential Island)*, are some of his most recognizable work.

On April 14, 2014, Globovisión (a Venezuelan news channel known for its opposition stance) hosted a televised special in support of presidential candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski. Emilio Lovera and Laureano Márquez participated in this explicit call to action by

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<sup>176</sup> Lovera, E. (2017). *Biografía*.

presenting a satirical sketch.<sup>177</sup> The premise was simple: Francisco de Miranda (Laureano Marquez), one Venezuela's founding fathers of Venezuela, teaches a high school student (Emilio Lovera) about social classes, discrimination, and government systems in colonial times. The entire sketch, of course, was interwoven with references to both current day politics and politicians. In a scene where Lovera asks Francisco de Miranda to classify well-known Venezuelans according to their colonial class, Márquez praises opposition politicians Maria Corina Machado and Capriles yet disparages government supporter and businessman, Gustavo Cisneros.<sup>178</sup>

Their criticism of government inefficiency, corruption, and disregard for democracy is also clear. Comically slow then Lovera asks for help with homework that requires him to define government systems. Márquez corrects Lovera's very literal definitions of autocracy, aristocracy, tyranny, and finally, arrives at anarchy. As he begins to explain, Lovera chimes in "[I]t's when murders happen free of consequence, when public services collapse, when there is a shortage of basic goods (...)." <sup>179</sup> As Márquez congratulates him for finally getting a correct answer, Lovera looks down abashed, "I had that down as 21<sup>st</sup>-century socialism," pointedly referencing one of the government's most recognizable slogans.<sup>180</sup>

Lovera's online work is even more irreverent than his stage performances. *La Isla Presidencial* is an adult web animation that depicts several world leaders trapped on a paradise island after a cruise gone wrong. It features characters such as Barack Obama, Daniel Ortega, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, Enrique Peña Nieto, King Juan Carlos, Mariano Rajoy, Rafael

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<sup>177</sup> [Junior Marín]. (2013, April 6). [HD] Sketch de Emilio Lovera y Laureano Marquez en acto a favor de Henrique Capriles R. [Video file].

<sup>178</sup> [Junior Marín]. (2013, April 6). [HD] Sketch de Emilio Lovera y Laureano Marquez en acto a favor de Henrique Capriles R. [Video file].

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

Correa, Juan Manuel Santos, Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro. The series was published on YouTube from 2010 to 2014, in collaborate with *El Chiguire Bipolar* (a satirical news website). Lovera provides voiceover work for Hugo Chávez and multiple other characters.

In an episode leading up to Chávez demise, Chávez is kidnapped by Obama and turned into a cyborg. He escapes, but while malfunctioning, goes into “messiah” mode. It is a parody Chávez’s near canonization by the most faithful of his followers and the way the government has capitalized on the cult of personality. He begins performing ‘miracles’ by accident, such as shocking all the fish in the ocean so the presidents can eat or turning Daniel Ortega into an intellectual.<sup>181</sup>

*La Isla Presidencial*’s portrayal of Maduro is not flattering either. Instead, Maduro is introduced as a bumbling fool who lacks the charisma of his predecessor and often mispronounces even the most basic of words.<sup>182</sup> In “El Pajarito de Maduro” (“Maduro’s Little Bird”), the show’s writers directly reference one of the president’s most infamous moments.<sup>183</sup> While campaigning for presidential elections, Maduro claimed a little bird brought him news of Chavez in the afterlife.<sup>184</sup> Animated Maduro believes his bird but is ultimately discredited in the eyes of the other presidents (Rajoy and the King go as far as to call him an idiot).<sup>185</sup> In another episode, “#ConcluIsla” (“#ConcluIsland”), Maduro is interviewed CNN reporter Fernando del

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<sup>181</sup> [NuevOn]. (2013, April 25). Isla Presidencial - El Mesías Pt 1 (5to episodio de 2da temporada). [Video file].

<sup>182</sup> [NuevOn]. (2014, May 15). Isla Presidencial - “El Papa” (3er. Episodio 3ra. Temporada). [Video file].

<sup>183</sup> [NuevOn]. (2013, August 15). Isla Presidencial - “El Pajarito de Maduro” (9no episodio de 2da temporada). [Video file].

<sup>184</sup> Maduro dice que Chávez se le apareció en forma de “pajarito chiquitico” y lo bendijo. (2013, April 2).

<sup>185</sup> [NuevOn]. (2013, August 15). Isla Presidencial - “El Pajarito de Maduro” (9no episodio de 2da temporada). [Video file].

Rincón about Venezuela's shortage crisis. His response? "It's a disappearance. Like when David Copperfull disappeared the statue of liberty."<sup>186</sup>

*Claudio Nazoa*

For Claudio Nazoa, being a *humorista* is the family business. He is the son of Aquiles Nazoa, a famous Venezuelan *humorista* from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century whose work influenced not only his progeny but also other modern satirists such as Laureano Márquez. Claudio Nazoa currently works as the satirical columnist for *El Nacional*, one of Venezuela's major daily newspapers with nationwide circulation.

Much like his counterparts, Nazoa's work tends to present general criticisms in an effort to mitigate the possibility of repercussions. A piece titled "El gobierno estómago" ("The stomach government") rages about shortages of basic necessities as well as excessive government red tape. Nazoa points out the irony of the Tourism Ministry's ridiculous slogan: "Venezuela es chévere" (Venezuela is great).<sup>187</sup> He also condemns the government's incarceration of political prisoners while still remaining vague. In "Guide to happiness," he refers to "[t]he unmentionable, previously mentioned, in the midst of his egocentrism, bipolarity, and sociopathy, was happy in a country he made unhappy with his irresponsibility and intrinsic maliciousness."<sup>188</sup> However, Nazoa feels no compunction in expressing his admiration for Leopoldo López (incarcerated since 2014) and his family.

More openly critical pieces target some of the lower-ranking members of the government, particularly the electoral branch. Tibisay Lucena, president of the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE or National Electoral Council) is fair game in Nazoa's article "El infierno y el cielo de Tibisay" ("Tibisay's heaven and hell"). He writes as one who knew Lucena as a child,

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<sup>186</sup> [NuevOn]. (2014, May 26). Isla Presidencial - "#ConcluIsla". [Video file].

<sup>187</sup> Nazoa, C. (2014, August 11). El gobierno estómago.

<sup>188</sup> Nazoa, C. (2015, January 12). Guía de la felicidad.

implores her to remember hell and heaven. The former we are already living, Nazoa writes, but the second is only possible for those who repent for their earthly sins.<sup>189</sup>

One subject Nazoa clearly feels comfortable addressing is Venezuela's special relationship with Cuba. In "¡Libertad y papel tualé ya!" ("Liberty and toilet paper now!"), Nazoa claims that Puerto Rico is less of a colony to the United States than Venezuela is to Cuba – Puerto Rico's one advantage is being able to buy toilet paper without waiting in line. He calls for Venezuelans to challenge the government's disrespect for its own people and to retake the wheel.<sup>190</sup> "After the referendum", published during what turned out to be a failed attempt to recall Maduro as president in 2016,<sup>191</sup> Nazoa chides any Venezuelans who still support the government and jokingly prohibits them from consuming any whiskey.

"Government friend, do you like it when they f\*ck up the good things? Okay. But accept the consequences. Don't act like Raúl Castro, our imperial master, who ruined his people and is now the only one who drinks whiskey in Cuba."<sup>192</sup>

### *Pedro León Zapata*

Pedro León Zapata, commonly referred to simply as Zapata, was a legend in Venezuela political satire. His editorial cartoons or "Zapatazos" were published in *El Nacional* for five decades, providing commentary on Venezuela politics and society since 1965. Zapata died February 6, 2015, and published his last "Zapatazo" on the same date, effectively drawing cartoons up until his death.

Zapatazo often condemned the government in his cartoons, even though he did not explicitly illustrate politicians often. Most of his work needs to be placed in the context of contemporaneous events to be understood. For example, the "Zapatazo" for February 19, 2014,

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<sup>189</sup> Nazoa, C. (2016, Mayo 23). El infierno y el cielo de Tibisay.

<sup>190</sup> Nazoa, C. (2013, May 27). ¡Libertad y papel tualé ya!

<sup>191</sup> Venezuela: el CNE paraliza el referendo revocatorio a Nicolás Maduro. (2012, September 28).

<sup>192</sup> Nazoa, C. (2016, June 27). Después del revocatorio.

was published on the heels of the deadliest and riotous protests in recent Venezuelan history. The cartoon is a simple speech bubble with the words “The blackout of democracy seems eternal, but the day we least expect it will end.”<sup>193</sup>

When not addressing the government, Zapata let himself be more specific. He criticized the illegitimate incarceration of opposition leader Leopoldo López, one of many attempts to impede popular MUD politicians. López, in particular, was prohibited from running for office in 2008 for alleged corruption during the attempted coup d'état of 2002 and jailed for inciting violence by calling for massive protests in 2014. Much like the aforementioned cartoon, this illustration is a simple speech bubble: “They cannot claim UN interference to deny Leopoldo López liberty.”<sup>194</sup>

Some cartoons explicitly name political actors. In the lead up to the 2012 presidential elections, also Chávez's last before his death, *El Nacional* published a “Zapatazo” discouraging voters from electing the incumbent presidential candidate. “Voting for Chávez is voting for Fidel’ In other words, voting for 50 years of hunger and need,” wrote Zapata.<sup>195</sup> Another, published in the lead-up to the presidential elections following Chávez's death, lambasted the CNE (National Electoral Council). “The CNE is blind, deaf, and dumb when the opposition protests,” wrote Zapata.<sup>196</sup> Other cartoons are vague, only understandable when put into context. For example, after the government finally confirmed Chávez's death after months of rumors, Zapata illustrated a particularly deadpan piece. “Everyone knows,” one figure whispers into the ear of the other.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Zapata, P. L. (Cartoonist). (2014, February 19). “Zapatazo: miércoles 19 de febrero de 2014.”

<sup>194</sup> Zapata, P. L. (Cartoonist). (2014, November 17). “Zapatazo: lunes 17 de noviembre de 2014.”

<sup>195</sup> Zapata, P. L. (Cartoonist). (2012, September 28). “Zapatazo: 28 de septiembre de 2012.”

<sup>196</sup> Zapata, P. L. (Cartoonist). (2013, April 1). “Zapatazo: lunes 1 de abril de 2013.”

<sup>197</sup> Zapata, P. L. (Cartoonist). (2013, March 6). “Zapatazo: miércoles 6 de marzo de 2013.”

However, much like his fellow *humoristas*, Zapata is unafraid to explicitly campaign for a certain candidate. During Capriles' 2012 presidential election campaign, Zapata made his own vote clear: "There are three conjugations: past, present, and Capriles."<sup>198</sup>

### *Rayma Suprani*

Rayma Suprani, known by the mononym Rayma, who published her cartoons in *El Universal* a national newspaper for nineteen years before she was unceremoniously fired. Rayma was twice awarded the Pedro León Zapata Prize for Best Cartoonist and now works promoting freedom of the press with NGOs like Freedom House and speaking at conferences like the Oslo Freedom Forum.<sup>199</sup> Rayma's body of work has been removed from the *El Universal* website and is now only found, undated, on her own website.

Unlike Zapata, Rayma's editorial cartoons rely on illustrations more than words. However, her references to Venezuelan society and politics are clear. Her criticisms usually address general themes rather than specific politicians, which kept her within the bounds of propriety as the Venezuelan government increasingly restricted freedom of the press.

One of Rayma's cartoons illustrates an injured Venezuelan flag, bleeding from bullet holes. Inseguridad, or rampant crime, is one of the major concerns plaguing the people of Venezuela.<sup>200</sup> Homicide rates, highly contested between the government and NGOs, are calculated to be 58 homicides per 100,000 compared to the United States' 4.<sup>201</sup> Another displays a bloody microphone hanging from a noose, referencing government efforts to curtail free speech.<sup>202</sup> One cartoon displays Venezuelans as a flock of birds, migrating away from their home

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<sup>198</sup> Zapata, P. L. (Cartoonist). (2012, June 19). "Zapatazo: martes 19 de junio de 2012."

<sup>199</sup> Suprani, R. (2017). *Bio*.

<sup>200</sup> Suprani, R. (2017). *Political Cartoons*. (Note: Venezuelan flag with bullet holes)

<sup>201</sup> Grillo & Benezra. (2016, May 20). Jimmy Carter blesses Venezuelan election as fear of violence grows.

<sup>202</sup> Suprani, R. (2017). *Political Cartoons*. (Note: Bloody microphone)

country. In 2015, 1.91% of Venezuelans lived outside of Venezuela, representative of the hundreds of thousands who have fled economic crisis, violence, and political persecution.<sup>203</sup>

Occasionally, Rayma's work is more specific in who she targets. A cartoon highlighting the National Guard and their role in upholding the government's increasingly unconstitutional measures depicts the National Guard beating a copy of the 1999 Constitution.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, this illustrates the government's use of the National Guard as a tool to repress protestors, whether peaceful or violent, by any means possible. Lastly, Rayma occasionally targets Chavismo itself as a movement. In one cartoon, Rayma depicts capitalism, socialism, and communism as sets of books, while a bale of hay is titled "Chavismo." The pun is one understood by all Venezuelans: in Venezuelan slang, to "hablar paja" or "speak hay" means "to bullshit."<sup>205</sup>

### *EDO*

Eduardo Sanabria, better known by his pseudonym EDO, is a Venezuelan artist who has had his work published in major newspapers within Venezuela as well as the U.S. EDO is also a two-time recipient of the Pedro León Zapata Award for Best Cartoonist.<sup>206</sup> He regularly shares his political cartoons on his Twitter, has published them in a series of volumes, as well as holding exhibitions in major cities worldwide.<sup>207</sup>

Unlike his counterparts, Zapata and Rayma, EDO is not tied to a major newspaper as their in-house editorial cartoonist. This potentially creates a more permissible environment for him to produce satire, even going so far as criticizing the Venezuelan government's role in persecuting its opponents. The victims of political persecution recognizable in EDO's work, from recognizable public figures to average citizens. In "Simonovis", EDO contrasts the

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<sup>203</sup> International Organization for Migration. (2016, May). *Venezuela*.

<sup>204</sup> Suprani, R. (2017). *Political Cartoons*. (Note: National Guard and Constitution)

<sup>205</sup> Suprani, R. (2017). *Political Cartoons*. (Note: Chavismo)

<sup>206</sup> Sanabria, E. (2017). *About Me*.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

government's severe treatment of Ivan Simonovis with its light-handed approach to rising crime and murder rates.<sup>208</sup> Simonovis, who acted as police chief during the 2002 coup d'état, was arrested in 2004 and sentenced to thirty years in prison, of which he served ten.<sup>209</sup> This cartoon was published in 2013, one year before his release from prison into house arrest. Similarly, EDO is critical the infamous Tascón list, a formerly legitimate petition for a referendum which the Venezuelan government turned into an instrument of blacklisting: firing employees and blocking job application based on who signed the list.<sup>210211</sup> Other victims EDO features include agriculturalist Franklin Brito whose death from a hunger strike in 2010 established him as an almost martyr for the Venezuelan opposition.<sup>212213</sup>

EDO is also unabashed in his depiction of government officials. “Ven a mi... #narcosobrinosCULPABLES” (“Come to me... #GUILTYnarconephews”) is brazen in both illustration and title. When two nephews of Cilia Flores, current First Lady and former president of the National Assembly, were convicted of conspiring to transport cocaine to the United States, EDO did not spare either them or their aunt in his cartoon.<sup>214</sup> He illustrated the nephews as red demons (a color closely associated with Chavismo) with plug-ended tails, a clear reference to the term *enchufado* (literally means plugged-in) which Venezuelans use to refer to those who profit from government dealings.

Moreover, in “SE ACABÓ LA FIESTA!” (“THE PARTY IS OVER!”), EDO explicitly criticizes both former president Chávez and his successor, Maduro. The illustration is a play on

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<sup>208</sup> Sanabria, E. [edoilustrado]. (2013, July 28). Caricatura EDO. Simonovis.

<sup>209</sup> Dickson López & De La Rosa. (2014, September 20). Cronología del caso Iván Simonovis.

<sup>210</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2000). *A Decade Under Chávez*.

<sup>211</sup> Sanabria, E. [edoilustrado]. (2012, July 2). Caricatura EDO: El expediente.

<sup>212</sup> Sanabria, E. [edoilustrado]. (2014, August 30). Caricatura EDO: Franklin Brito.

<sup>213</sup> Venezuelan anti-Chavez hunger striker dies (2010, August 31).

<sup>214</sup> Mele, C. (2016, November 18). 2 Nephews of Venezuela's First Lady Convicted on Drug Charges in U.S. Court.

the Spanish idiom *época de vacas flacas* or *time of skinny cows*: Chávez is surrounded by an abundance of dollars and fat cows, which symbolize prosperity. Maduro is left to pay for the exorbitant bill, surrounded by skinny cows while a small red bird (symbolism for Chávez) flutters away. EDO's criticism is clear: outrageous government spending was easy to mask when the price of oil was high, but since its decline, Maduro has struggled to pay the debts his predecessor accrued.<sup>215</sup>

*Roberto Weil*

Working as the editorial cartoonist for the newspaper *Tal Cual*, Roberto Weil has been “[r]epresenting the tyranny suffered by the people of Venezuela for more than 16 years.”<sup>216</sup> However, he chose to leave Venezuela in 2014 and now lives in and works from the United States. In 2016, he was awarded Cartoonist of the Year by the Inter-American Press Association.<sup>217</sup>

A common theme in Weil's work is the subject of corruption, which he openly criticizes the government for. However, he rarely includes the faces of public figures, instead of using symbols commonly associated with the government. In “Siguiendo las huellas” (“Following the footsteps”) a military official with pockets overflowing with money instructs the battered outline of Venezuela to follow the grim reaper.<sup>218</sup> The military and its close relationship with the Chávez regime has been criticized for corruption, poor rule of law, and for dealing with criminals such as drug traffickers.<sup>219</sup> “Están muy bien” (“They're very well-off”) is another criticism of corruption, featuring exorbitantly wealthy politicians reassuring a starving audience about the state of the

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<sup>215</sup> Krauss, C. (2017, April 12). Venezuela Staves Off Default, but Low Oil Prices Pose a Threat.

<sup>216</sup> Weil, R. (2017). Bio.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Weil, R. [WEIL\_caricatura]. (2014, September 1). ... siguiendo las huellas ...

<sup>219</sup> Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (2000). 2015 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR).

national economy.<sup>220</sup> The speaker's words are reminiscent of Maduro's infamous address to Congress, in which he included the phrase "God will provide" as part of his plan for economic recuperation.<sup>221</sup>

Other cartoons by Weil are slightly more explicit. During the 2016 efforts to invoke a referendum, Weil published the following cartoon as a critique of government rallies. Maduro is depicted as a massive mosquito, dressed in the presidential sash, guaranteeing his audience "hunger and repression for the people."<sup>222</sup> In front of him is a tupamaro, a member of an armed collective known for targeting opposition protests.<sup>223</sup>

### *El Chigüire Bipolar*

"Biased news without veracity in the hands of a rodent with psychological problems" is the tagline for *El Chigüire Bipolar (The Bipolar Capybara)*, one of Venezuela's most popular news satire websites. Although the site's authors critique pop culture and politics alike, it specializes in sensationally false headlines or parodies of current events. The site, similar to the United States' *The Onion*, is the brainchild of Juan Ravell and Osvaldo Graciani (also co-creators of *La Isla Presidencial*).<sup>224</sup> Satire produced and published online is even more openly critical than that published through more traditional mediums, such as print.

In the articles published on the site, the authors freely name the political actors they intend to mock. This includes government institutions such as the TSJ (Supreme Tribunal of Justice) and major government positions such as the presidency.

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<sup>220</sup> Weil, R. [WEIL\_caricatura]. (2014, April 14). ... Están muy bien ...

<sup>221</sup> [Lapatilla Patillavideo]. (2015, January 21). Maduro plantea programa de recuperación económica: "Dios proveerá".

<sup>222</sup> Weil, R. [WEIL\_caricatura]. (2016, June 3). JUNIO 3, 2016 #venezuela #revocatorio2016 <http://ift.tt/1U3nXDz> [Tweet]

<sup>223</sup> Así operan los 'colectivos', las fuerzas paramilitares chavistas de Venezuela. (2014, February 23).

<sup>224</sup> De qué se ríen los venezolanos. (2012, December 6).

In an article that lampoons both political persecution and the TSJ, the headline reads “TSJ admits that in order to liberate Afiuni, it needs beauty standard reform.”<sup>225</sup> Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni was arrested in 2009 for granting parole to a political prisoner. After Chávez requested she be sentenced to thirty years, Afiuni was imprisoned alongside inmates whom she had convicted.<sup>226</sup> In a similarly critical article, *El Chigüire Bipolar* announced: “TSJ te declara enemigo de la Revolución” (“TSJ declares you an enemy of the Revolution”).<sup>227</sup> It satirizes the discriminatory procedure by which government institutions outlaw dissidence and targets members of the political opposition. Naming magistrate Francisco Carrasquero, the article claims, “You are all guilty and will be until proven otherwise. To start with, who the hell will prove you are innocent? Look in a mirror. Your faces show treason to the Revolution. You should be ashamed!”<sup>228</sup>

*El Chigüire Bipolar* did not spare even the government’s highest office from its sardonic humor. After then-president Chávez spent months outside of the public eye during his illness, Venezuelans began to speculate as to whether or not they even had a president at all.<sup>229</sup> Coupled with the government’s uncharacteristic reticence, the mystery surrounding Chávez’s health gave cause for humor online. “Niño se disfraza de Chávez y no sale en carnavales” (“Kid dresses up as Chávez and does not come out for Carnival”) parodies the presidents’ secretive condition while referencing Carnival, Venezuela’s equivalent to the Halloween costume tradition.<sup>230</sup>

The online news satire site has likewise disparaged Chávez’s successor. “Toll between Maduro’s tongue and mouth makes him incapable of taking coherent measures” unflinchingly

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<sup>225</sup> TSJ admite que para liberar a Afiuni, antes deben reformar cánones de belleza. (2012, October 31).

<sup>226</sup> Venezuela Violates Rights of Judge Afiuni in Trial. (2016, November 23).

<sup>227</sup> TSJ te declara enemigo de la Revolución. (2014, March 21).

<sup>228</sup> TSJ te declara enemigo de la Revolución. (2014, March 21).

<sup>229</sup> Tegel, S. (2015, February 6). Venezuelan Secrecy Is So Bad Some Doubt Chavez’s Date of Death.

<sup>230</sup> Niño se disfraza de Chávez y no sale en carnavales. (2013, Febrero 8).

criticizes the country's highest public official.<sup>231</sup> The article claims scientists have discovered a payable toll which impedes Maduro from making and expressing articulate decisions. It clearly references Maduro's public appearances, including *cadenas* (mandatory televised speeches directed at the general population), where the current Venezuelan president has struggled to be as charismatic, engaging, or even understandable as his predecessor.<sup>232</sup> Often, president Maduro is lambasted for his use of crass language, poor control of grammar, and embarrassing missteps, such as one occasion in which he self-incriminated his government by proclaiming, "These capitalists who speculate and steal like us!"<sup>233</sup>

#### What type of censorship?

As previously indicated, Venezuela has earned dismal scores in free press rankings across the board, clearly categorized as state censorship. Freedom House declared Venezuela's Not Free in 2015.<sup>234</sup> The country ranks 136 out of 180 countries on the 2016 World Press Freedom Index. During that year, Reporters Sans Frontiers cataloged a series of attacks on the press that constituted a substantial threat to free speech. These are, but not limited to: denying entry to the foreign press, attacking media headquarters, targeting, threatening and/or imprisoning journalists,<sup>235</sup> and even a paper shortage that has reduced the circulation of national newspapers.<sup>236</sup> It is no surprise then that political satirists operate within a similarly hostile environment.

The current administration has taken offense to political humor since its beginnings. In October of 2000, Chávez took the opportunity to confront cartoonist Pedro León Zapata over one

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<sup>231</sup> Peaje entre cerebro y lengua de Maduro lo hace incapaz de tomar medidas coherentes. (2015, January 5).

<sup>232</sup> Peregil, F. (2012, July 22). Chávez, Correa y Fernández, líderes en el uso de la propaganda televisiva.

<sup>233</sup> Nicolás Maduro: 'Los capitalistas roban como nosotros' (2013, November 27).

<sup>234</sup> Freedom House. (2016). *Freedom of the Press Report: Venezuela*.

<sup>235</sup> Reporters Without Borders. (2016, September 2). *Venezuela: constant violations of media freedom*.

<sup>236</sup> Diario Tal Cual dejará de circular el 27-F: esperan publicarlo de forma seminal. (2015, January 27).

of his latest “Zapatazos.” The image depicted a sword with Chávez’s face, surrounded by the words, “I like civil society to be firm and discreet.” On air, Chávez challenged the cartoonist: “Pedro León, how much did they pay you for that?” In his next “Zapatazo,” Zapata responded: “...and speaking like crazies, Hugo Rafael, how much did Zapata pay you for that massive advertisement?”<sup>237</sup> This first interaction between the government and satirists set the tone for the events of the following years, including the closure of RCTV.

Both governments under Chávez and Maduro have been persistent in targeting satirists and limiting the space within which they operate. This is especially true for well-known public figures, who have on the receiving end of threats and sanctions and increasingly find it impossible to work from Venezuela.

Caricaturist Rayma Suprani is one of the most recognizable cases. After the sale of newspaper El Universal to a company, the newspaper’s employees alleged the new buyers were little more than a front for pro-government investors (akin to the circumstances under which other pro-opposition media was sold, such as Globovisión and Cadena Capriles).<sup>238</sup> Rayma, who continued to be employed by the newspaper, was fired after publishing a cartoon criticizing the government’s role in the country’s failing health care system.<sup>239</sup> Since her employment was terminated, Rayma has been involved in multiple efforts to address the issue of freedom of the press in Venezuela, even after receiving threats over her cartoons.<sup>240</sup>

Other satirists who have found themselves victims of censorship include Laureano Márquez, who discloses his struggles with censors in his body of work. In the piece “Diálogo,” Márquez claims: “I can say what I feel without fear of insults because if I have been trained in

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<sup>237</sup> Bravo, D. (2005). Estudios de la (des) cortesía en español.

<sup>238</sup> Neuman, W. (2014, July 14). Sale of Paper in Venezuela Raises Fears on Freedom.

<sup>239</sup> López, V. (2014, September 18). Venezuelan cartoonist ‘fired’ over healthcare satire.

<sup>240</sup> Suprani, R. (2017). *Bio*.

anything for the past 15 years, it's been in receiving them – often accompanied by threats, fines, sanctions, and more fines.”<sup>241</sup> After ChataingTV (a comedy talk show hosted by Luis Chataing) was taken off air in 2014, Márquez devoted an entire piece to the role of humor in Venezuelan politics, as well denouncing the persecution of his many colleagues (Rayma, Weil, Zapata, and Edo for example).<sup>242</sup> Márquez has even chosen to go on record with national media, criticizing the government for denying him and other humorists the possibility of presenting in national theaters or other government-owned venues.<sup>243</sup>

There exist other incidents in which satirists and the government have faced off. In 2014, government officials decried Weil as a “fascist” after a cartoon depicting rats at a funeral coincided with the murder of PSUV congressman Robert Serra. Tareck El Aissami, current vice-president and also wanted by the United States for drug trafficking,<sup>244</sup> claimed Weil was “making light of the *chavista* people.”<sup>245</sup> Weil claims he submitted his Sunday cartoon fifteen days prior to publication, as part of the newspaper's procedure.<sup>246</sup> Although he continues to illustrate for *Tal Cual*, Weil chose to migrate with his family to the United States in September 2014.<sup>247</sup>

Even Emilio Lovera, who has continued to work despite the end of *Radio Rochela*, has claimed he sometimes struggles to find the motivation to produce humor. “I have not even been able to talk about that, nor find anything funny or laughable about it,” Lovera commented in

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<sup>241</sup> Márquez, L. (2014, November 11). *Diálogo*.

<sup>242</sup> Márquez, L. (2014, June 13). *Chatanicidio*.

<sup>243</sup> [NTN24]. (2013, April 6). Humorista venezolano señala que en su país hay una “persecución” contra los humoristas disidentes.

<sup>244</sup> Casey & Herrero. (2017, February 16) How a Politician Accused of Drug Trafficking Became Venezuela's Vice President.

<sup>245</sup> Voceros del gobierno acusaron a Weil de “fascista” por caricatura que no circuló. (2014, October 5)

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Weil, R. (2017). *Bio*.

reference to the 2014 protests, in which students and opposition took to the streets to demonstrate against inflation, shortage, and rising crime.<sup>248</sup>

Venezuelan satirists continuously seek news spaces in which to operate. Although public appearances and traditional press are increasingly more restricted areas for freedom of expression, the internet has yet to be as heavily regulated. The success of websites like *El Chigüire Bipolar* and web shows such as *La Isla Presidencial* have paved the way for online satire. Similar websites, such as *El Mostacho* and *Maduradas.com* have also gained a following online. Satirists have moved their work to either their own blogs or websites (such as Márquez) or found an audience through social media sites like Twitter or YouTube (ex.: Edo, Weil, and Lovera). Even as the Venezuelan government works to impede and restrict the exercise of freedom of speech, the internet has proven to be a place where political satire can flourish – for now.

### **Summary of Results**

Counterintuitively, Venezuelan satire scores a 5 in terms of how openly critical it is. A score of 5 indicates that political satirists are not only critical but actively work to become influential actors within politics. Many of the pieces published by these *humoristas* adopt a moral perspective. They alternatively admonish public officials, call attention to perceived injustices, or even persuade their audiences to cast their vote for a certain candidate. These satirists perceive themselves as core members of the opposition: producing their work is a form of encouraging and maintaining a flame of resistance. In his piece “Chantanicido,” Márquez claimed: “In fact, the more humor is persecuted then the stronger is its force, the more it is censored then the more it says, and the more it is corralled then the freer it becomes; because

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<sup>248</sup> Comediante Emilio Lovera: “Es muy difícil hacer humor en Venezuela”. (2014, August 29).

creativity has no frontiers, no limits, no barriers, nor is it stopped by bars or hurt by bullets.

Humor is the last stronghold of freedom when freedom has been lost in other spaces.”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Márquez, L. (2014, June 13). *Chatanicidio*.

## CONCLUSION

### **Limitations**

Although this study attempts to select samples and case studies that are as representative as possible of both regime type and political satire, there are limitations to the generalizability of the study. It is important to note that Venezuela, despite being a semi-authoritarian state, is only a certain type of semi-authoritarian state. Venezuela is experiencing a transition into authoritarianism – unlike other semi-authoritarian states, where there might have been a move from authoritarianism towards democracy. In that sense, this study attempts to describe the nature of political satire as regime type moves from democratic towards authoritarian and illustrate the way in which political satire changes in response to an increasingly limited environment.

Additionally, as a case study, Cuba is also representative of one kind of authoritarian regime: a communist state. Within Latin America and throughout the world, there have been other types of authoritarian states, specifically right-wing military dictatorships. Although both function similarly in terms of freedom of speech, the levels of repression amongst these authoritarian states vary widely and must be taken into account when examining political satire.

### **Case Analysis**

#### United States: How does political satire operate in democracies?

In openly critical content, the United States achieved a score of 5. Satirists within the country have become political actors, active participants in the democracy within which they operate. Both Stewart and Colbert used their shows as platforms for political participation, involving themselves in the electoral process. There are other instances of satirists becoming similarly involved: Al Franken, former *Saturday Night Live* writer and performer, currently

serves as the Democratic senator from Minnesota.<sup>250</sup> In the same vein, British-born satirist Jon Oliver often includes himself and his viewers in U.S. politics through his HBO show, *Last Week Tonight*, by pulling stunts like creating advertisement intended to educate president Donald Trump on policy matters.<sup>251</sup>

Moreover, U.S. satire certainly criticizes a broad spectrum of targets. Satirists feel safe targeting all types of political actors: politicians, high-ranking officials, government institutions, legislation, regulatory policies, political ideologies, as well as social and economic issues. Nonetheless, there is an ideological bias in traditional broadcast media. Televised satire is primarily dominated by liberal hosts, while conservative satire has minimal exposure. This imbalance does tend to even out on other formats, particularly in cartoons and online satire.

The role of satire in the U.S. specifically is also notable. During the 2016 presidential election, increasingly critical and divisive satire formed part of the onslaught of polarizing media. This increased sense of partisanship bias in media has also contributed to the rise of “fake news”, the sense that traditional forms of media should be regarded with a sense of inherent mistrust. Conversely, there are those who regard satire as one of the few purveyors of truth. In a 2007 poll by the Pew Research Center, respondents rated Jon Stewart as the #4 most admired journalist.<sup>252</sup> This established *The Daily Show*, a satirical news show with a fake news anchor, as a significant influence on U.S. dialogue about politics and current events.

In terms of censorship, the U.S. practices social censorship. Although there do exist other limitations on satire: for example, satirists who diverge from the editorial line or the ownerships’ preferred direction. Recently, Tomi Lahren (a conservative host who witty or humorous

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<sup>250</sup> Tumulty, K. (2017, March 18). Al Franken may be the perfect senator for the Trump era — a deadly serious funnyman.

<sup>251</sup> Garber, M. (2017, February 13). John Oliver Is Buying Ads on Cable News to Talk to President Trump.

<sup>252</sup> Kakutani, M. (2008, August 15). Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?

criticisms of liberals) was fired from her show on TheBlaze after expressing pro-choice views that differed from those of her boss, Glenn Beck.<sup>253</sup> However, this factor is mitigated by the fact that most satirists work for companies whose views align with their own or with companies who are required to let them speak unpunished.

Instead, the main operating force of censorship in the United States is social restrictions or taboos. Simply put, satirists avoid subjects so obviously inappropriate according to social mores that it is almost instinctual to shy away from these. That is not to say humor within the United States cannot be inappropriate or rude or offensive. In fact, often times the best humor is the kind that crosses boundaries. But there are certain boundaries that are frankly untouchable even by the crassest of comedians.

In regards to democratic states, the role of satire is as following: social criticism, in the form of political satire, is an inherent part of the democratic process. It is one of the many ways in which the *demos*, or “the people” are able to voice their concerns, their desires, and their contempt for the government through satirists. In other ways, political satire serves to motivate voters and to bridge the disconnect between politics and the viewer, even simplifying subjects that may not be understandable to the unfamiliar viewer. This is not to say that it does not emerge from a biased space – but are not all news sources inherently colored by human bias?

Moreover, in democracies, satire is not overly restricted. Democracies do not pass legislation or enforce regulatory policies limiting the exercise of free speech. Indeed, free speech is crucial to the democratic process – opening forums for social critique (satire included). Instead, limits on satire take the form of taboos and mores. Social forces are at play, which could

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<sup>253</sup> Haag, M. (2017, April 7). Tomi Lahren Sues Glenn Beck, Saying She Was Fired for Her Stance on Abortion.

even be considered an extension of the “people’s voice.” Society, or the publics, shape the satire and the discourse surrounding politics.

All in all, political satire has as legitimate of a role in democracy as the free press. Furthermore, satire produced within democracies is satire in its most developed form: critical, broad in its targets, and shaped by the society that consumes it.

#### Cuba: How does political satire operate in autocracies?

Cuban satire, that is produced within the island, is unsurprising in its score. Earning only a 1, Cuban satirists generally use themes and insinuations in their critiques, rather than explicitly naming political actors (especially high-ranking government officials). Instead, Cuban satire tends to depict the daily struggles of Cubans on the island, making vague references to political subjects through the consequences of Cuban government policies. In terms of breadth of targets, Cuban satire is primarily anti-government. The only kind of satire possible is the type produced by the government which, as an authoritarian state with control over most forms of media, would seem more of a propaganda piece rather than authentic social criticism.

If satire in Cuba is not advocating for political change, then there is the question of what function does it serve. The role of satire within Cuba seems to be to provide a forum for subtle protest and criticisms without the fear of repercussion and creating a secret social dialogue between the oppressed. Additionally, it provides a coping mechanism for those living under repression: sometimes, what else is left to do but laugh? Outside of Cuba, political humor creates a sense of community not only between exiles but represents a connection to the island.

Censorship in Cuba is quite clearly state-sponsored as the government actively works to curtail freedom of speech. However, years of oppression have resulted in Cubans developing ingenious ways to circumvent state censorship. For example, *el paquete* is one such form of mild

subversion. Satire, specifically, has even witnessed a loosening of restrictions as president Obama guest stars on *Vivir del Cuento*.

In autocracies, satire serves as one of the few remaining venues for social criticism. In fact, because of humorous and duplicitous nature of satire, it is ideal for this role. While traditional journalists and news outlets might be constantly under threat, forms of entertainment like comedy are necessary to keeping autocracies in power. Simply put, entertainment keeps the oppressed masses unaware of their state and could serve to bolster the regime. However, satire can also take that protection and uses to its advantage. For a country accustomed to years of dictatorship and oppression, subtle satire might represent the best public outlet for dissent while avoiding repression. In a stable authoritarian state with no obvious indicator toward a democratic transition, satire could, potentially, be one of the first spaces for the restoration of freedom of speech.

#### Venezuela: How does political satire operate in semi-authoritarian states?

As the semi-authoritarian state, Venezuela counterintuitively scores a 5. Its satirists become political actors, active participants in what remains of a democratic process. Marquez, Lovera, Rayma, Zapata, Weil, and Edo embed messages in their work that encourage political protest. Other times, they urge their audiences to vote for a certain candidate. Some of these satirists are even willing to appear on the campaign trail in support of their chosen candidate.

Nonetheless, Venezuelan satire does not target a broad spectrum of targets, particularly from the ideological standpoint. The majority of the satire produced is directed at the Venezuelan government or at social and economic issues that are associated with the government. Most of these satirists self-identify as members of the opposition, whose function is to antagonize to the Venezuelan government. However, this is not exclusive to the Chavez administration.

Satire and humor have been strong sources of social criticism in Venezuela since before 1999. As a country that has survived colonialism, a century of *caudillismo*, and two 20<sup>th</sup> century military dictatorships, Venezuelans are intimately acquainted with oppression. Satirists have been keeping governments in check for decades. *Humorista* Aquiles Nazoa was critical of the government until his death in the 1970s, Zapata began his “Zapatazos” in 1965, and Radio Rochela became a fixture on Venezuelan television in 1960. For Venezuela, humor might be one of the final strongholds of freedom, which is indicative of the role of satire in semi-authoritarian states.

In Venezuela, censorship is state-sponsored (like in most other semi-authoritarian states). The Maduro administration, following in Chávez’s legacy, actively works to curtail freedom of speech within the country. As a result of constant threats, fines, and sanctions, many satirists have either lost their jobs or chosen to emigrate to a different country. Although their work is still disseminated in Venezuela (for example, Weil’s cartoons are still published in *Tal Cual*), *humoristas* are relying more and more on the internet and social media platforms to circulate their criticisms.

Surprisingly, the case of Venezuela demonstrates that satire in semi-authoritarian states, instead of experiencing a decline proportional to decreasing civil freedom, instead continues as critical if not more critical than before. Humor is a bastion of freedom, especially in a country that is familiar with political instability and quick to recognize oppression. Satire operating within a restricted space does not change to reflect oppression, instead, it grows and expands as a challenge to the oppressor. It is as if having tasted democracy encourage satirists to redouble their efforts maintain the last political voices that they have.

Because of this, satire in semi-authoritarian states evolves from a form of social criticism to a form of social protest. Rather than just criticize, satirists use their work to become active political participants and shape the country within which they operate.

### **Conclusion**

Political regimes do affect the nature of political satire, although not always in the ways one might expect. Rather than experience a parallel decline in satire and democracy, satire remains openly critical until it is under an authoritarian state. Satire, unlike other forms of press, is protected by its veil of humor and can exist even under authoritarianism (although under much harsher restrictions than a democracy). Ultimately, political satire is shaped by the political regime under which it operates – and, in some cases, also shaping the politics it criticizes. Political satire, then, is not just relevant to the study of censorship and freedom of speech, but should also be explored in its role as a form of protest and as an active influence on the political landscape.

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