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The Ides of Laughs: The Politicisation of American Late-Night Talk Shows Over Time and Under Trump

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The election of President Trump has not just shaken traditional politics but also traditional American late-night talk shows. Partisan comedy in late night has dramatically risen in response to Trump's own polarising rise and hosts have stopped sitting on the fence to become figureheads of the anti-Trump resistance. Little academic research has so far been conducted into this phenomenon. This paper uses in-depth, elite interviews to offer a comprehensive account of how the humour of American late-night talk shows and Saturday Night Live has changed from apolitical to proudly partisan. Findings suggest there are now three types of political comedy: superficial, analytical and partisan. For decades, late night went by the adage of 'political neutrality keeps the audience happy', with hosts mocking simplistic political caricatures (superficial political comedy). However, increased media proliferation has reduced audience sizes, and therefore reduced the risk of audience alienation, leading to a rise in more substantive political comedy and commentary. New partisan comedy would appear to be a ratings winner and shows no signs of letting up until at least the end of Trump's presidency.

Keywords: Talk shows; Humour; Politicisation; Trump Presidency;

INTRODUCTION

In 1954, a local Manhattan variety programme was turned into a national show by NBC (D'Addario and Rothman 2015). The show, 'Tonight!' (later renamed The Tonight Show) spawned the late-night talk show genre and its descendants have been an American television staple ever since (PBS 2016). The Tonight Show ran virtually monopolistically until 1992, when rivals began to last more than a few years, and was hosted initially by Steve Allen and Jack Paar before Johnny Carson began his 30-year reign in 1962. While Allen once considered running for California governor and Paar interviewed Castro and JFK, their shows were not particularly political (Severo 2000, Nesteroff 2015, O'Connor 1997). Allen was anarchic and irreverent - "you can trace a line directly from Steve Allen to David Letterman" (Macks 2015, p. 22) - and Paar was more conversationalist than stand-up (Corliss 2004). Similarly, Carson cultivated a politically neutral comedic style, designed to please as many viewers as possible.

In the 64 years since Tonight! debuted, however, late night talk shows have grown in number and evolved from puff pieces into cutting edge political commentary. As Freeman (2017) says in the Guardian, "[i]nstead of being the thing Americans fall asleep in front of, dominated by fluffy celebrity interviews, it has become the source of some of the most high-profile political activism in the US." There are seemingly endless articles being written about the scathing attacks upon President Trump's administration by CBS' Stephen Colbert, ABC's Jimmy Kimmel, and NBC's Seth Meyers, along with many more cable offerings.

Indeed, The Tonight Show enjoyed being number one in the ratings almost consistently since its inception with the wisdom of 'don't be divisive' (Molla et al 2015). However, when Trump became President, other shows began ignoring this adage in favour of sharper political comedy. The move led competitors like The Late Show with Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel Live! to beat or contest The Tonight Show whose host, Jimmy Fallon, has sought to maintain political neutrality.

My argument is, therefore, that where once late night actively avoided politically divisive humour out of fear of alienating and losing audiences (and, subsequently, advertising revenue), comedy writers have gradually been given more permission from audiences to be more brazen with commentary and criticism of political matters. This has led to the hostile environment that exists in the Trump era. In order to examine this shift from the proudly apolitical Carson to the hyperpartisan Colbert, along with the impact of the Trump presidency on the genre, this paper gathers and analyses testimony from those who know late night best: award-winning late-night head writers, academics and Michael Dukakis - the subject of many late-night jokes during his Presidential run. This unprecedented combination therefore presents a unique, holistic understanding of late night's politicisation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Origins of Late-Night Neutrality

All late-night talk shows begin with a monologue of jokes and Macks (2015) names Carson "the one who made the [opening] monologue important by putting focus on pop culture" (p. 25). Carson, while known as the first King of Late Night (Sweeney 2006, Leamer 1989, Bushkin 2013), appears only sparsely among academic texts on the subject of late night. However, he appears frequently and reverentially in popular culture - an example being labelled "Mr. Television, Titan of talk ... comedian laureate of a nation that loves to laugh itself to sleep" by People magazine (1989). When Carson is mentioned, his political neutrality invariably arises. For example, Miller (2003) discusses how his monologues: "contained commentaries on the political and cultural developments of the day. Careful to suppress his personal biases and opinions, Carson aimed his barbs willy-nilly at all points on the political spectrum".

Similarly, Lichter et al argue that "part of Carson's...success and staying power...could be attributed to [his] tendency to steer clear of social or political controversy" (2015, p. 21). As such, it seemed the way to get the biggest audience was to stay politically neutral. This logic was further credited by the slew of more

political and provocative shows that tried to rival Carson, like those of Dick Cavett, Merv Griffin and David Frost, but only lasted a few years (Ibid.). Indeed, Carson's conscious aversion to showing his personal political preferences became one of his defining characteristics. His close friend and lawyer, Henry Buskin, wrote that, while Carson "was by instinct and upbringing definitely Republican...of an Eisenhower sort we don't see anymore", he "was scrupulous to never share a political view with his viewers" quoting Carson as explaining "why should I lose 50 percent of my audience?" (Bushkin 2013, p. 154-155). Carson's onscreen persona, then, was affable, neutral and largely avoided any political skewering.

Late Night's Initial Political Flirting

An oft-cited watershed moment of late night and politics combining is Bill Clinton appearing on Arsenio Hall's show in 1992 playing the saxophone. Although at the time Clinton's appearance on the short-lived Arsenio was "a controversial move that had pundits predicting dire consequences" (CMPA 2008), Clinton's sax appeal saw him move from third position, behind independent Ross Perot, to winning the election and started a trend that "has fused politics to entertainment and made late-night talk shows such as Letterman and Leno increasingly important players in American politics" (Schultz 2004, p.215). However, this moment is just a replica of a 1988 incident where, after Clinton gave an exhaustingly long speech at the Democratic National Convention that resulted in boos, Carson repeatedly made jokes over several nights at Clinton's expense, labelling him a "windbag" (Golshan 2016). After Carson's uncharacteristic mocking, Clinton's team convinced the producers to book him as a guest on the promise he would play the saxophone. Clinton appeared a week after the conference, made self-deprecating jokes, played a song, and saved his political career (Golshan 2016, The Associated Press 2005).

Lichter et al (2015) argue 1992 is pivotal in the politicisation of late-night comedy as it also marked the year Jay Leno took over from Carson as host of The Tonight Show:

> "This transition produced a marked increase in the political content of the show, as Leno expanded the length of the monologues and increased the number of jokes about politics and politicians. [...] From that point on, political humour became a regular part of late-night talk show monologues. To the end of his tenure, Leno featured more political humour than any other late-night host on broadcast network television" (p. 208).

David Letterman created The Late Show, the first long-running competitor to The Tonight Show, when he left NBC for CBS after Leno was named Carson's successor instead of him (Carter 1994). The show ran until Stephen Colbert took over in 2015. As fellow late-night host Conan O'Brien describes it, "Carson was the show, and then [Letterman] came along and created the anti-show and it was a revelation" (CNN 2015).

Before hosting Late Night, Conan O'Brien wrote for Saturday Night Live (SNL) and, although this paper will focus primarily on late night talk shows, it is important to note SNL's existence. In addition to launching O'Brien and other hosts such as Fallon and Meyers, it has made political late-night comedy a staple of American television since 1975 (Miller and Shales 2015). Since its inception, it has mocked and parodied presidents and other political figures, leading to long-running debates as to whether SNL is "an equal-opportunity offender" or displays "evidence of a liberal...bias"

(Peifer 2012, p. 273). Tryon points to a 1988 sketch parodying the debate between Michael Dukakis and George H. W. Bush showing Bush, played by Dana Carvey, as only able to speak in repeated political catchphrases and clichés before Dukakis, played by Jon Lovitz, addresses the camera with "I can't believe I'm losing to this guy!" (2016, p.111). Tryon argues that, similar to Stewart's Daily Show years later, the political comedy here offered both a "critique of Bush himself" and of "the political media and voters" who are "implicated in supporting someone who offers no substantial reason why he is qualified to be president" (Ibid). In that, then, SNL can be seen as part of mainstream late-night political comedy alongside talk shows.

Letterman and Leno both claimed to have modelled themselves after Carson but went in different directions with political humour. Letterman "had always professed to be bored by politics" and so his "political detachment [went] beyond Carson's into outright alienation" (Peterson 2008, p. 103). In 1987, Buxton noted that "Letterman shies away from the topical material Carson prefers, instead exploring the ironies and absurdities of ordinary experience" and "toys with the television medium" (p. 377). Conversely, while Leno "didn't betray any more political passion or interest than Letterman in his early career", he altered his act to become more "Carsonesque" which, to him, meant topical monologues where he ended up telling more political jokes than Letterman and Carson combined, averaging 9.4 per monologue compared to Carson's 6.4 (Peterson 2008, p. 103). However, Leno, like Carson, avoided taking a side with his jokes. Indeed, Macks argued in 2014 that:

> "the reason Jay was number one in the ratings for nineteen years was because Americans don't like uncomfortable and unpredictable late night as much as critics do. It's also maybe why Jimmy Fallon dominates ratings now." (p. 30)

Leno and Letterman both made Clinton jokes, but that was seemingly less to do with lofty ideals of satire and more the low-hanging fruit of the cartoonish scandal-ridden Clinton that was irresistible to comedy writers. Letterman has said how his show was:

> "always looking for the easiest path, the most obvious joke. Bill Clinton having sex with the intern, well, that's not comedic heavy lifting. After that, it became George W. Bush, and I thought he was funny in a harmless way" (Letterman in Marchese 2017).

Indeed, Letterman still largely stayed away from political jokes until Jon Stewart "made it so that not doing political stuff got to be the elephant in the room" (Ibid.).

When Jon Stewart took over from Craig Kilborn in 1999 as host of Comedy Central's The Daily Show he quickly changed the tone from sophomoric to satirical. TV critic James Poniewozik stated:

> "At that time, late-night political humour was pitched towards the middle. It was about foibles and politicians' particular characteristics and tics and failures - the Monica Lewinsky joke, the George Bush-is-kind-of-dumb joke. [...] It could be scathing and damaging and influence the public's perception of a candidate or a politician, but it wasn't really...about engaging with the idea of politics, the politics of politics. [Then] Jon Stewart came along." (quoted in Smith 2017 p.33)

The predominant difference between the big four late night hosts – Carson, Leno, Letterman and Stewart – was Stewart's "faith in the political process" (Peterson 2008, p.118). Peterson explains:

> "Carson's interest in politics was keen, but mostly recreational. For Letterman and for Leno, dealing with pols and elections seems to be largely a matter of professional obligation. Jon Stewart actually cares about politics - which distinguishes him clearly from the other late-night hosts, but from most American citizens" (Ibid.).

Media Proliferation: 'Don't Touch That Dial'

As media proliferation has led to more channels and shows, it has simultaneously led to smaller audiences. Webster (2005) notes that, although ABC, CBS, and NBC "do provide a modicum of common ground for American viewers" it is clear that "the phenomenon of audience fragmentation is well underway", noting the audience share of the big three dropped from 69.3% in 1985 to just 17.3% in 2005 (p. 378). He argues that audience fragmentation and polarisation come hand in hand as "the common public sphere is broken into many 'sphericules' or 'enclaves'" (Ibid., p. 379); similar to the argument that confirmation bias (Nickerson 1998) has led to echo chambers (Hindman 2008, Baumgartner et al 2012) as audiences choose to listen solely to political views with which they already agree.

Audiences seeking out content that aligns with their views is not a new phenomenon. In 1985, Zillmann and Bryant made the case that audiences employ "selective exposure" - which is "behaviour that is deliberately performed to attain and sustain perceptual control of the particular stimulus events" - in order to cope with excessive information (p. 2). Sunstein (2001) cautioned that too much of this inevitably leads to polarisation. However, as Webster (2005) notes, this is by no means bad for TV producers: "[c]ertainly, media companies that are interested in creating loyal, demographically homogeneous audiences are only too happy to cater for these preferences" (p. 369). So, as the number of late-night shows increases, it follows that smaller, more loyal audiences are subsequently formed as viewers seek out which hosts most espouse and align with their own views. Indeed, as Rogak says:

> "It didn't take long before The Colbert Report [a spin-off of The Daily Show, helmed by Stephen Colbert] and The Daily Show started to siphon viewers away from the old stalwarts of late-night: Letterman and Leno" (2011, p.172).

Sella (2000)'s statement, that "a comic's take on politics is nimble, bitesize and utterly clear. And Americans prefer to take their news with sugar", perfectly explains the success of The Daily Show's comedy. As a result, network late night had to follow the cable show's direction out of fear of losing viewers.

Scholars disagree about the impact of The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, and later The Colbert Report, and whether they had a positive or negative impact on young, prospective voters and, therefore, democracy. Baumgartner (2006) found that that viewers of The Daily Show were better informed but more cynical about politicians and government generally and Hart & Hartelius (2007) argue political comedy could make viewers nihilistic towards politics. Conversely, Jones (2010) argued such news comedy shows "have made politics pleasurable…not just through laughter [but] through deeper levels of identification and activity they provide for viewers as citizens" (p.233). Furthermore, Baum (2002) argues that "many otherwise politically inattentive individuals are exposed to information about high-profile

political issues...as an incidental by-product of seeking entertainment" (p.91). As such, Tryon argues, these shows "aren't making us more cynical" but rather "are exposing the underlying cynicism of the political process itself and imagining healthier...alternatives" (2016, p. 104). Indeed, Fox et al (2007) found The Daily Show offered the same amount of substantive information as network newscasts. Importantly, while Jennings et al (2018) argue the increased tribalism in political discourse has as much to do with "the proliferation of political comedy" as with political attack ads, they state that the existing evidence does not support the "prevailing public narrative" of its harm to democracy, arguing the danger of such comedy has been "overstated" by academics and critics (p. 236).

Ultimately, regardless of the whether these shows are deemed good or bad for society, their existence and success shows that audiences are actively seeking out incisive politically comedy. The literature suggests a gradual politicisation of late-night comedy; a series of stepping stones as audiences gave more permission, and more reason, for hosts to get off the fence and be more political opinionated. Whereas Carson and, for the most part, Leno and Letterman believed that anything sharper than superficial political humour could lose audiences, Stewart and Colbert showed that acute, analytical political comedy was actually a way to draw viewers away from the big network talk shows and create their own loyal followings. Going into the Trump presidency, then, the reviewed literature therefore shows a stage gradually being set for today's openly partisan comedy to take place.

Media Communtary of Late-Night Under Trump's Presidency

With the recentness of Trump's presidency, very little academic work has yet to be published analysing its impact on late night comedy. However, media commentary is in abundance and provides a useful barometer. Going by such commentary, it appears Trump's presidency has turned late night hosts into the figureheads of the anti-Trump "resistance" (Rutenberg 2017, Flanagan 2017). Grierson (2017) notes how cable shows like Full Frontal with Samantha Bee and Last Week Tonight with John Oliver "operate in the posttalk, post-*Daily Show* universe, doing away with celebrity chitchat for hard-hitting, welcome-to-the-resistance political comedy". She is therefore surprised that three network shows - Colbert, Meyers and Kimmel, which have to worry about "losing sponsors (and high-profile movie stars) with each piece of pointed cultural critique" - are equally able to speak openly and caustically against the Trump administration and seeing their ratings "soar" in response. The phrase 'post-Daily Show' is key; the lion share of current late-night hosts - Colbert, Bee, Oliver, Trevor Noah, Jordan Klepper - have been Jon Stewart alum. Meyers, while never on the show, has been named by some as the rightful heir to Stewart (Robinson 2015). Meyers himself notes that they all "[owe] an enormous debt to Jon Stewart's Daily Show, because [it] started this trend of people having talk shows where they have a point of view that they're not afraid to share" (Freeman 2017).

With Trump as president, it seems late night cannot be too political. There appears to be less incentive to stay neutral, either on network or cable shows. In 2014, Baumgartner and Morris noted that "the plurality of political [late night] jokes focus on the president in power. In this regard, then, there is an anti-administration bias...but no systemic partisan or ideological bias" (p. 20). However, given the volume of late-night comedy on air at the moment that is pitched in opposition to

Trump, perhaps that bias now exists. Indeed, Fallon appears to be the exception, standing alone by acting politically neutral. Known as innately apolitical, his Tonight Show dominated the ratings until 15 September 2016 when Fallon conducted a jovial interview with then-Candidate Trump and ruffled his hair. The immediate backlash was immense with many critics claiming Fallon had "humanized" the future President (Strachan 2016, Shepherd 2016). It led Fallon to state on record: "I didn't do it to humanize him. I almost did it to minimize him. I didn't think that would be a compliment" (Itzkoff 2017). Furthermore, Lichter et al concluded in 2015 that a similarity between all late-night shows at the time, including Letterman, Leno, Meyers and Kimmel, was that they "could by no means be considered predominantly political in nature" (p.25). Again, with the amount of comedic commentary about the Trump administration espoused by the shows today - along with segments dedicated to the dissection of political news (such as Meyer's 'A Closer Look' segment) - this conclusion now seems out-dated and ill-fitting.

METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, very little academic work has yet been published on the effects of Trump's presidency upon late night talk shows. To rectify this I have sought, with unique access, to document and analyse the perceptions and accounts of an unparalleled combination of interviewees, including Presidential Nominee Michael Dukakis and late-night behemoth Jon Macks. All interviewees noted that something extraordinary is happening to politics and late-night comedy with both rapidly moving into unchartered territories. As such, this paper is extremely timely and will be among the first to publish expert views and analysis of how comedy is responding to this unparalleled era of American political history. My research questions are therefore: in the perceptions of the interviewees, what factors led to late night comedy becoming more political, to what extent has Trump's presidency influenced the tone of late night, and where might late night go in the future?"

I conducted semi-structured, elite interviews with late night talk show writers (those making the jokes), academics who have written extensively about the genre (those observing the jokes), as well as a politician who has been the subject of late-night jokes. This holistic approach was designed to provide unique and comprehensive insight on the politicisation of late night before and since Trump's election. By using semi-structured interviews, I am able to ensure several areas of interest are covered while leaving the conversation open for nuanced, tangential information to emerge. While their elite status would otherwise make it difficult to maintain anonymity, I did receive express permission to use interviewees' names in this paper. My interviews were conducted with the people listed below.

Table 1: Interviewees and their Credentials:

Michael Dukakis	1988 Democratic Nominee for President - Longest-serving Governor of Massachusetts

Jon Macks	
	• Former DC political consultant
	• Wrote for The Tonight Show with Jay Leno from 1992 to 2014
	• Wrote 21 Oscar ceremonies
	• Wrote 10 Golden Globe ceremonies
	• Wrote 20 Emmys ceremonies
	• Nominated for eight Emmy awards
	• Wrote Monologue: What Makes America Laugh Before Bed (2015)
Joe Toplyn	
	• Writer for Late Night with David Letterman
	• Head writer for both Late Night with David Letterman
	• Head writer for The Tonight Show with Jay Leno
	• Won four Emmys
	• Nominated for a further 16 Emmys
	• Wrote Comedy Writing for Late Night TV (2014)
Mike Jann	
	• Monologue writer for The Late Show with Jay Leno for 22 years
	• Emmy-nominated
	• Teaches Screenwriting at UCLA

Dr. Jody
C. Baumgartner &
Dr.
Jonathan S. Morris
	• Associate professors of political science
	• at
	     East Carolina University
	     Written extensively on politics and late
	     night talk show humour. Books include:
	     o Politics Is A Joke: How TV Comedians
	     Are Remaking Political Life (2015) o
	     Laughing Matters: Humour and
	     American Politics in the Media Age
	     (2008)

FINDINGS

Graph It became apparent from the research that the political humour of late night can be divided into three types: superficial political humour (surface-level, cartoonish comedy where host can remain largely neutral), analytical political humour (deeper, more incisive political humour that seeks to explain complex political stories) and partisan humour (openly one-sided jokes where the host's personal politics are obvious).

Superficial Political Humour: Don't Rock The Boat

All interviewees stated that they believe the politicality of late night has been a growing trend, with most pointing that it began, in a much gentler form, with Carson's Tonight Show. The consensus from Macks and Toplyn is that Johnny Carson told political monologue jokes, albeit fewer than Leno. Although, they appear to disagree on whether Johnny Carson's humour should necessarily be defined as 'political'.

In alignment with Bushkin (2013)'s assertions, Toplyn says:

> "Carson had the ultimate late-night mass audience - he was the main voice in late night - he didn't want to alienate half his audience by taking a side on a political issue but he would still make jokes about the story".

However, Toplyn adds that he believes "Carson did do political jokes - he did jokes about politics" although he "did not do jokes about politics that took a definite side on an issue. Or, if he did, then he would alternate sides. [...] He tried to be even-handed". As Jann says: "there isn't a comedian in the world who doesn't wish his audience was bigger or twice as big", so there seemed little point in splitting your viewers by being firmly one-sided. Macks disagrees that Carson's jokes were political, stating that, although Carson did "a few jokes here and there about Richard Nixon and things like that", Macks believes "Johnny's humour was not political". A reasonable description of Carson's humour to take from this, then, is that it was topical, superficial political humour; surface-level political humour that made light

of politicians but never reveals his personal politics. Toplyn believes Letterman's humour was similar to Carson's in this regard:

> "I think Dave [Letterman] always felt 'I need a mass audience, I have to appeal to as many people as I can'. His audience wasn't as large as Jay's audience on The Tonight Show for whatever reason but I think Dave realised he could not afford to lose a big chunk of his audience by taking a one-sided stand on the president".

In contrast, Macks does believe, under Leno, the Tonight Show monologues became "much more political" but that was partly due to the fact Leno's monologues were much longer than Carson's, as also noted by both Peterson (2008) and Lichter et al (2015). However, whilst Leno did make many jokes about politicians, they were always about their relatable characteristics - surface-level caricatures of their public personas - rather than policy analyses. As Morris puts it, "Leno kept everything light-hearted. He talked about political figures but wasn't political."
Similarly, Jann paraphrases Leno in a recent interview:

> "he said 'we made fun of both sides but we made fun of human foibles'. Clinton was a sex maniac, Bush was a dummy, this guy was horny, this guy was stupid - those are human foibles that everyone in the audience...can laugh at...without it requiring you to register for a political party".

Macks would also seem to agree:

> "Jay's theory was, essentially, we all know someone who's cheated on their wife. [...] But...compared to the Iran Contra hearings, not everyone knows someone who has traded arms for hostages with Nicaraguans in Iran. But we all know somebody whose pants are round their ankles. So, given that, you could make jokes about Clinton - and Jay did that."

Jann's description of the jokes targets as "foibles", and how they revolved around simple premises like 'George Bush is dumb', directly aligns with Poniewozik's statements quoted in Smith 2017. Carson, Leno and Letterman's political comedy was superficial: it made fun of politicians as caricatures - their "foibles" - without the hosts nailing their personal colours to the mast. Toplyn appears to agree with this, saying the Clinton/Lewinsky affair was "a huge story" because "a lot of people could relate to it: it's the President, it's politics and it's sex and everyone knows and cares about those things". However, he notes that it was not at all ideologically driven: "the political content of the comedy ebbed and flowed as the news of the day ebbed and flowed. We wouldn't have a political agenda on either show [Leno or Letterman]". Still, such jokes can be seen as early signs of late-night writers feeling on increasingly safer ground to mock politicians, leading to the more sectarian comedic style seen today.

Superficial political comedy is still about today, with *The Late Late Show* with James Corden (which Baumgartner describes as "basically almost completely apolitical", although it still makes jokes about the President and other political figures), SNL (which has always been in part a satirical comedy show) and The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. SNL has always parodied political figures but, conventionally, in a superficial, cartoonishly satirical way. An example of this is how they handled the 1988 Presidential Election between Dukakis and Bush. Both candidates were parodied several times on the show - such as one sketch, mentioned in the literature

review, which satirised a debate between them. Dukakis himself fondly recalls Jon Lovitz' impression of him, recounting the sketch:

> "Bush... has trouble completing sentences...and then they turn to Lovitz, playing me, and Lovitz going "How can I be losing to this guy?".

Dukakis finds the sketch and Lovitz' impression "very funny", saying of the comedian: "I thought he was terrific!". However, it would be difficult to describe such comedy as caustic or partisan. Now, however, Baumgartner states "if you want to look at SNL, it's probably more political since the Trump Presidency". Indeed, when asked if late night generally had become more partisan since Trump's election, Dukakis says categorically: "Oh, I don't think there's any question about it. Yeah." Indeed, Morris states that since Trump became the Republican nominee,

> "the political tone of the late-night comics has sharpened almost across the board, with the exception of Jimmy Fallon, perhaps, who has seen his ratings drop in the last year or so."

The Polarisation of Trump's Hair

When asked if Trump had dramatically increased the political content of late-night comedy, all interviewees said variants on the same word: "unquestionably". Defiantly, Fallon has consistently sought to maintain a politically neutral comedic tone, which has been to his detriment. Morris notes the reason Fallon's ratings have "dropped considerably" is "probably because, some people argue, that he's not political enough". Indeed, Morris has recently written a chapter on how pivotal Trump's Tonight Show appearance was, in which Fallon "just joked around" with Trump and "tousled his hair" but "the next day, in social media and in other media, ... was ripped for 'humanising a monster'".

Indeed, a unifying theme from all the interviewees was that the backlash Fallon faced marked a watershed moment in the politicisation of late-night comedy. Fallon was not treating Trump any differently than any other guest, nor any differently than Trump had been treated by other hosts, yet faced unprecedented public wrath. Timing was seemingly the major cause behind this. As Morris recalls, in early 2016, Colbert and Kimmel's did similarly congenial comedy with Trump and received positive reactions: "everybody laughed and Trump laughed and they were having a great time". The difference with Fallon was "because it was September 15th and people were starting to think 'my god, this guy might win' [so they said] Jimmy [Fallon] 'humanised' him." The problem was precisely that Fallon treated Trump just as any other guest; with whimsy instead of contempt. It pinpointed the moment the Carsonera adage of 'political neutrality keeps the audience happy' could clearly no longer be relied upon.

The interviewees were also unanimous in their condemnation of the backlash, however; seeing it as misplaced and unwarranted. Baumgartner calls the accusation that Fallon humanised Trump "a preposterously idiotic thing". Likewise, Jann becomes incensed at the thought of the criticism:

> "I just think it's absurd that the word 'humanised' - I can't even go there. Trump was so popular that it was like 'why *don't* you run for president? [...] I thought it was cool when Fallon messed his hair. His hair was something he's famous for. It was a late-night thing for years: 'is it a toupee or not? What's

with the hair?' So Jimmy Fallon touched his hair. The idea [that] there was hell to pay for that is so sad."

Morris can see a direct line from the proliferation of media to the decrease in politically neutral humour, which plays into Zillman and Bryant (1985) and Sunstein (2001)'s theories:

"everyone can [now] seek out information that fits with their own preconceived notions and this has been the case since the media environment fractured in the nineties and we went from four or five channels to hundreds and then thousands. [...] And so, a fractured media environment has spilled over into political comedy and you get a contribution to the echo chamber. [...] If you think polarisation is bad for democracy, then you could look at political humour and say they're part of the problem now."

Morris also seems to agree with Webster (2005)'s assertions that polarised audiences are good for business, saying:

"The evidence is showing - I'm sure producers are looking at this and seeing that - 'attack Trump, get more viewers'. 'Criticise Trump policies, criticise Trump's behaviour, get more viewers'. 'Criticise republicans, get more viewers'. Everyone's following that line and so the reigns have been taken off."

As such, audiences have seen and welcomed the rise of partisan humour, predominantly on cable but also on network television with new host of The Late Show Stephen Colbert.

Partisian Humour: Hosts Being Openly Anti-Trump

Baumgartner states categorically "there's absolutely no question that The Late Show with Stephen Colbert is more political than The Late Show with David Letterman". Stressing he hasn't measured it and it is all just "impressionistic stuff", he says:

"I think everyone would agree that, number one, he talks about politics more and, number two, the way he talks about politics reflects a certain view point; reflects a partisan view point."

Macks agrees that, in the Trump era, comedy is a lot more one-sided:

"Now it's much more partisan. You rarely see jokes even when Democrats flail about which - I'm a Democratic - and we often, as a party, do. It's not that [hosts are] being protective - well, I think some of the hosts may be protective of Democrats, I truly do believe that. And others, I think, are so overwhelmed by the clownishness."

Morris adds that he and Baumgartner now view Politics Is A Joke, written in 2014, "as a history piece" because all the jokes analysed were "simple, juvenile jokes, in the same vein as your Johnny Carson" which no longer exist. Morris argues that there is now "a serious political tone to this satire", with hosts being more "editorial" by sharing opinions and "criticising policy", because audiences "look for them to do that". Citing Fallon as an example, Morris states explicitly: "if a political comedy walks the middle, and just makes jokes, they're losing viewers".

While there's unanimous agreement Colbert is certainly partisan with his humour, there's disagreement with who else would fit into that category. Toplyn would appear to deem Meyers just as partisan as Colbert: "I think Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers and other hosts are definitely taking a stand on one side of President Trump - the anti-Trump side." Similarly, Jimmy Kimmel - previously of an apolitical, everyman persona - recently became more openly political with his monologues, following his son's health problems. As Morris puts it, Kimmel went "from Joe Sixpack to Mr Policy". Asked whether late night has become more political and partisan recently, Dukakis says:

> "Now, I don't watch a lot of these things. You know, I can barely get the New York Times finished before I fall asleep. But a lot of people do and a lot of the [late night hosts] have become very political. And I assume tonight we're going to have another example of this when Trump delivers the State Of The Union address and then we have [Jimmy Kimmel] putting the porn actress [Stormy Daniels] on afterwards, which will be kind of interesting. [...] And Kimmel himself has gone after the healthcare system...with what happened with his child...but I think that kind of stuff is fine, you know. I don't have any problem with that."

Baumgartner, however, believes the partisanry of Colbert is "probably more the exception than the rule" and that it's "not the case with Kimmel [or] Seth Meyers". Although, he does note that Meyers "is most certainly not apolitical" and that "a couple of segments that [Meyers] does that are not apolitical" mentioning his 'A Closer Look' segment, which analyses and deconstructs news stories. He argues that "there are more offerings on cable which...are almost, by definition, political". Morris agrees:

> "Samantha Bee especially, John Oliver especially, have become very political and almost editorial in their approach that this is showing a much sharper political agenda than what existed before."

Interestingly, Baumgarter argues Colbert's increased partisan comedic tone is more notable than those of Bee, Oliver and Noah because their shows were "set up to almost exclusively be political". As such, he doesn't think the amount of political humour has changed since writing Politics Is A Joke in the pre-Trump era of 2014. There is, however, a medium between superficial political comedy and partisan comedy: analytical political comedy.

Analytical Political Comedy: 'Let's Break All This Down'
Analytical political comedy uses humour to explain political stories or expose hypocrisy rather than simply venting disdain. Its origins appear to lie firmly with Jon Stewart and, without him, Colbert's brand of overtly political humour could likely not exist. Toplyn, Macks, Baumgartner, Jann, and Morris all mention Stewart and/or The Daily Show's 'Indecision 2000' election coverage as a major turning point in late night becoming more politically incisive: Macks, for example, states Stewart was "incredibly" influential in this shift. Morris argues Stewart started the trend of people "tuning into political humour for perspective and for a take on the political world as much as they are tuning into laugh". Whereas Leno was making superficial political jokes about Bush being dumb and Clinton being horny, and Letterman largely avoiding politics altogether, Stewart was using comedy to fact-

check and break down complex issues, laying the groundwork for shows like Meyers' and Oliver's. Like with the emergence of partisan humour, the proliferation of media allowed Stewart to do this. As Toplyn explains:

> "Jon Stewart obviously did a very influential show, a great show, a funny show. He took sides. And his audience was a million viewers a night, a million and a half - I don't know the exact number. But he did not need four million viewers to pay the bills. Comedy Central did not expect four million viewers. So he could afford to take a side because the economics of his show allowed him to get by with a smaller audience."

With a smaller audience than Leno or Letterman, and certainly smaller than what Carson got, Stewart was able to be braver with the political content of his comedy as it reduced the risk of people being alienated. In fact, having a niche enabled a loyal audience to build and develop a taste for more substantive political comedy. Stewart's work certainly set the stage for Colbert, former The Daily Show alum, to create The Colbert Report and, subsequently, take The Late Show into partisan territory. Toplyn points to cable shows such as Full Frontal with Samantha Bee on small cable channel TBS, along with The Daily Show with Trevor Noah on Comedy Central - both former Daily Show correspondents - as further examples of this. Meyers also fits in this category, with his analytical segments like 'A Closer Look'. Therefore Stewart, seemingly single-handedly, developed the framework for substantive, analytical political comedy and it is possible to see the DNA of this in most late night shows today. For this reason, Baumgarter confidently predicts that one day Jon Stewart "will be spoken of in the same vein as Mark Twain in how he changed comedy". It is that comedic framework that really allowed Trump to be joked about in the way he is on today's late night - and, unlike in Carson's day, it is a way that is bringing in viewers and advertising revenue.

Being Anti-Trump is Good For Business

Talking about Trump has been good for ratings ever since he announced his candidacy. Under Trump, according to Morris: "the nature of politics has changed so dramatically and humour's changing along with it" as it "really gives humourists so much material that it feels like an exponential expansion of political humour", likening it to the "growth in a different type of material in the 1990s with Bill Clinton"; the foible-based superficial political comedy. Macks, however, adds a note of caution to comedy writers with such a cartoonish subject:

> "some people say to me 'Wow, it must be so easy to make jokes about Donald Trump!'. It is, in one sense, but you gotta be wary of being Johnny One-Note, [however] all the hosts are doing a really good job".

Over the past three years late night hosts have had a love/hate relationship with Donald Trump. They loved candidate Trump, euphorically goading him into running. As Morris remembers, when Trump announced his run "Jon Stewart publicly...thanked Mr. Trump for giving him material for the last six weeks of his show." However, initial euphoria quickly turned to trepidation and then horror the closer Trump came to the Presidency. In contrast to what he wrote in 2014, Morris

believes that most late-night shows have now become expressly political and with an inherent partisan bias against Trump's presidency.

Macks states simply: "look, if you're watching late night you're gonna get an anti-trump view". He notes the difference between eras in that, while he doesn't believe Leno or Letterman would "in any sense of the word, if they were on today, give a pro-Trump view", he does believe there would be "a little less of the pointedness and a little more of the 'let's laugh at this guy'". In other words, Trump would always be a great source of comedy, but late night has evolved to now be in a position to take a firm political stand. Dukakis quickly names Trump when asked why late night has become more political. In fact, he notes public discourse in general has become more political in the Trump era:

> "it's not like we're seeing dramatic increases in voter participation and that kind of stuff but there's just a hell of a lot more interest in commentary about politics around. [...] Thanks to Trump, my students are really hopped up about public service. It's very interesting."

Regardless of its major political - or societal - effects, making jokes about Trump is good for business for late night. Toplyn, who has an MBA from Harvard, says "A TV show is a business. [...] If they're making enough money to pay the bills and they're making their employer happy and they're not embarrassing their employer by saying anything illegal or extremely offensive, then the host and the people on the show get to keep their jobs and [...] continue doing what they're doing." Therefore, if the audience is calling for partisan comedy, it makes financial sense to deliver it.

'See You After The Break': What's Next for Late Night?

Ultimately, the consensus seems to be that, as long as Trump is president and gifting late night writers a wealth of comedic material, little will change. Toplyn, for example, states:

> "I can't see any reason the hosts will change what they're doing. Hosts who are taking a political stand will continue taking a political stand. I think if taking a stand were going to cause a ratings erosion then it would have taken place by now - meaning a ratings erosion beyond the general erosion that has taken place in late-night television show ratings."

Baumgartner concurs:

> "The Late Show is at least competitive with or...beating The Tonight Show for the first time since 1994? I mean, why would [Colbert] change?"

Toplyn also feels, as Trump is "such a wellspring of stories and angles that you can base your comedy on", that, "in general, it will be tougher to write comedy if Trump isn't around" but notes this is no different than when any other news dominating story goes away. He cites the O. J. Simpson trial saga as an example of this with the amount of jokes that generated for The Tonight Show's writers:

> "Once O. J. dropped out of the news, you could say it was a little harder to come up with comedy on The Tonight Show, but that's just because it was a big story that we found very productive - very fertile - as a source of comedy

topics. [...] But that's the job of a late-night comedy writer. Sometimes you have to dig hard for your topics."

Macks is the only interviewee to expressly call for more female late-night hosts, saying: "Samantha Bee does really good work, but I really wish there'd be a female late night host who would take not just political but would be in the Leno style". By "Leno style", Macks means the antithesis of the partisanry of Samantha Bee's humour. He name-checks Michelle Wolf - "a great new comic - caveat or warning, she's a friend of mine" - and notes Wolf's upcoming Netflix talk show series and White House Correspondents' Dinner hosting. Macks predicts "there will be a woman, like a Michelle Wolf, who takes over the mantle of a Jay Leno and does a bigger, broader style of comedy. Politics in there, of course" - but not predominantly political. Macks also believes that, with media proliferation, the days of monopolistic runs like Carson's and the 'Late Night wars' are past:

> "the audience is so diffuse that you have so many choices. I don't think we'll ever go back to where there was 'Jay versus Dave'. You know, you were Jewish or Catholic. You didn't have 72 religions to choose from. I don't think we'll ever go back".

Jann believes "pendulums swing back in forth", meaning late night comedy could return to a less partisan, more superficial style. But he notes, due to Trump's "divisive...style", this would likely only happen when America elects "another politician as a leader that everyone can calm the fuck down and get behind". However, with Trump's surprise election and the subsequent rise of partisan political humour, the future is hard to predict. Morris argues it is frankly impossible to know for sure what the future holds as we "can no longer apply any rule of logic or anything that happened in the past to even plot out any kind of prediction for the future politically". He continues, somewhat worrisomely, that:

> "The game has completely changed that I don't even know what game they're playing - and I'm a political scientist!"

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although there are occasional differences between the interviewees - and despite an equal mix of Democrats and Republicans - the bulk of sentiments seem agreed upon and, as such, there are definitive takeaways.

Firstly, of the five main network late night talk show hosts, whereas all could previously be deemed superficially political, since Trump's election only two remain that way: NBC's Fallon and CBS' Corden. Of the other three, two have become partisan (CBS' Colbert and ABC's Kimmel) and one is now straddling between analytical comedy and partisanship (NBC's Meyers). SNL has also become more partisan in tone. With cable shows, political comedy is more abundant, oscillating between partisan and analytical humour. However, this was broadly the case before Trump's election and so, although he gives them a lot of material, Trump hasn't markedly changed the tone of shows like Bee's, Oliver's, and Noah's. Interestingly, CBS and NBC have alternate political and apolitical shows on late night. At 11:35, the political Colbert on CBS rivals the apolitical Fallon on NBC and then, at 12:35, the political Meyers on NBC rivals apolitical Corden on CBS. It would be interesting to

discover if this was intentional so perhaps future studies could interview network heads, programme schedulers and show runners.

Secondly, aided by audience diffusion lowering the risk of losing viewers, late night has been getting more politically opinionated over decades. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart was pivotal in that it showed late night could be braver about sharing the host's political opinions and therefore began to lay the groundwork for today's line-up.

Thirdly, being anti-Trump is good for business. Talking about Trump has never been bad for ratings but, as the idea of him becoming president became more likely, audiences have looked to late night hosts to call out and resist his politics. Since Stewart, viewers have increasingly looked to late night hosts for their news – the spoonful of sugar to make the day's events more consumable. That trend has been catalysed by Trump and viewers now flock towards editorialisation as well as with just sweetened facts. A taste for analytical and openly partisan humour has thus been created and hosts like Colbert have responded.

Fourthly, the backlash faced by Fallon for the infamous hair ruffle was more symbolic at large sections of the public's nervousness at the increasing likelihood Trump would become President than a specific fault of Fallon's. Nonetheless, it can be used to show the beginning of when late night could no longer rely on neutrality for big ratings.

Fifthly, with media proliferation allowing more variety, the opportunity for a more diverse range of hosts seems increasingly viable. Macks noting how the overwhelming majority of late-night hosts are still white middle-aged men, and his calls for more female late night talk shows hosts could, sadly, have been made at any point since 'Tonight!' was first broadcast. However, in an environment where Donald Trump is President of the United States and the figureheads of political resistance are late night comedians, now might be the perfect time.

Finally, and ultimately, there seems little likelihood late night will become less political until Trump leaves office. How political late night will be after that will likely depend much more on who is president than who is hosting late night talk shows. For the time being, it makes sense for hosts to continue giving the audience what they want: comedy that ruffles feathers rather than hair.

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