

Fake News: from Satirical Truthiness to Alternative Facts

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In the wake of the 2016 election, Oxford Dictionaries declared “post-truth” to be the 2016 international word of the year.[i] The viral spread of fake news stories (such as the infamous “Pizzagate”[ii] scandal alleging that Hillary Clinton’s campaign chair John Podesta secretly ran an illegal sex trafficking ring out of a Washington D.C. pizzeria) no doubt helped to install America’s lunatic POTUS and his clown car of white supremacist cabinet members into the Oval Office.



In the halcyon days, the term “fake news” used to refer to hard-hitting satirical programs, in the vein of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Last Week Tonight*, and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. When the distinctions between truth and fiction, reality and absurdity, and authenticity and fakery have become so hopelessly blurred, comedic satire has felt like a last stand against the bottomless unreality of contemporary political media culture. Satire speaks truth to bullshit by usurping the very language of falsehood and nonsense.

In 2005, Stephen Colbert ironically declared “truthiness” to be “The Word” of the times.[iii] Re-watching this *Colbert Report* segment in 2017 feels like walking through a funhouse mirror. Truthiness, defined by Colbert as the fact that you don’t “think with your head” but that you “know with your heart,” has now become the lingua franca of Trumpist authoritarianism: it’s a truth that comes from the gut (because “you have more nerve endings there”—just ask your gut). But displacing cold hard facts with heated emotions evidently has consequences. Colbert quipped: “Who’s Britannica to tell me that the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I want to say it was 1941, that’s my right.” Performing his parodic Fox News persona (modeled on Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity), Colbert proceeds to defend both the justness of the Iraq War and Bush’s SCOTUS nomination of Harrier Miers as authentically truth-y, meanwhile skewering the dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reference books for being “all fact but no heart.”

Recently, Trump’s trusted counselor Kellyanne Conway has coined the term “alternative facts”[iv] (to rebrand abject lies), alleged a non-existent terrorist attack called “The Bowling Green Massacre”[v] (which the Internet promptly mocked as “too soon to laugh at” because we should wait until it actually happens), while Trump himself has taken to Twitter to perpetuate easily debunkable falsehoods on topics ranging from the weather and crowd size during his inauguration speech, to massive electoral voting fraud, to the unemployment and crime rates under Obama. Lies and fake news rule the day, while the Trump Administration’s litany of absurdities blur with their comedic lampooning—nonstop ridiculous nonsense, but with catastrophic human and environmental consequences. It is perhaps fitting in this climate—when the distinction between fact and falsehood has been overtaken by the battle for earning more clicks and “likes” on social media—that satire, mockumentary hoax, and comedic buffoonery would represent among the last frontiers of political truth.

Beyond Colbert’s prophetic vision of truthiness, the news satirist’s slippery mode of truth-telling offers a powerful syntax for asserting just conviction against the relativism of objectivity and

evidence. Laughter short-circuits the false opposition between the mind and the gut. It lends a critical comedic filter for managing the endemic desire to align truth not just with the evidence of objective reason, but with the satisfaction of emotional belief and moral conviction. In a political media climate driven by relentless spin, false equivalents, habitual instantaneity, hyper-mediation, and an overriding contradiction between the complexities of context and the need for easy sound bites, safeguarding the truth too often feels like an impossible leap of faith.

While “fake news” may always have been somewhat of a misnomer for comedic news satire, it is uncanny to see this once playful signifier so un-ironically repurposed in a political war of media disinformation. Sean Spicer (who reportedly chews and swallows two-and-a-half packs of Orbit cinnamon gum every day before noon[vi]), refused to answer questions from CNN or BuzzFeed, branding them “fake news!” at a White House Press Conference. Trump defended his unconstitutional immigration ban on Twitter, asserting that “any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election.” Similarly, “the failing @nytimes does major FAKE NEWS China story.”[vii] Fake news has become the catch-all signifier of an allegedly “post-truth” era, used to discredit or defame any truth that one simply does not like. Whoever has the strongest grip on power, or perhaps the loudest microphone, can thus dictate from whole cloth what’s real and what’s fake.

Yet, the fakery of fake news has always derived from its connotative ambiguity. This is the modus operandi of news satire from *The Daily Show* to *The Yes Men* to *The Onion*. For example, Andy Borowitz’s satirical *Borowitz Report* recently noted: “Trump says he has been treated very unfairly by people who wrote Constitution.”[viii] Though verifiably false, this certainly “feels true”—if not within the realm of something that Trump himself would plausibly Tweet. It is not hard to imagine Trump bemoaning the TOTAL DISTASTER of the U.S. Constitution and its crooked framers. An exercise in *reductio ad absurdum*—exposing illogic by taking problematic or dangerous rhetoric to its absurdist conclusions—satirical fake news dismantles bald-faced disinformation by debunking it not through science or reason but through the inherent absurdity of false logic.

On the eve of the inauguration, Michael Moore thus advised protesters to “fight Trump with an army of comedy.”[ix] Given the extent to which comedic discourse and satire have effectively shaped the terms of Trump’s candidacy and uniquely facilitated his political visibility, it seems inevitable that laughter would then hold the key to Trumpism’s dismantling. Yet, satire always cuts both ways. Even a devastating joke can risk preempting action and dissent through the ideological echo chambers of reassuring laughter. Is there still room for play when the relativism of truth and politicization of language might help pave the way for the very censorship of the free press, the privatization of the social safety net, the erosion of environmental protections, and the escalation of a global arms race—if not worse?

As Masha Gessen has forebodingly described Trump’s purchase on the truth, he “uses language to assert power over reality.”[x] In a post-election interview with Samantha Bee on *Full Frontal*, Gessen further paraphrases Trump’s unflagging bullshit: “What he is saying is, ‘I claim the right to say whatever the hell I please. And what are you gonna do about it?’” She compares Trump to the bully at the playground who steals your pencil box, hides it behind his back, and then claims not to have it in his hand. Against our protests, “But it’s there, in your right hand!,” the bully will insist, “But there’s nothing in my right hand.” In other words, “the point is not so much to take your pencil box, but to render you completely powerless, because everything you know how to do...is useless.” “And you look foolish,” Bee adds. “Yes,” and, Gessen nails the coffin shut, “you don’t get your box back either.”

Gessen (an outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin, gay civil rights activist, and prolific public intellectual) had to flee from Putin’s autocratic state—she is a political refugee, like many, with an ominous sense

of déjà-vu. Her article, “Autocracy: Rules for Survival”[xi] (like Richard Rorty’s *Achieving Our Country*[xii]), went viral after the election. In contrast to Rorty’s tempered pragmatism, which extols the virtues of moral exceptionalism to combat the relativism of truth in postmodern culture, Gessen preaches the powers of mass hysteria. Her rules for survival include #1) *Believe the autocrat*; #2) *Do not be taken in by small signs of normality*; #3) *Institutions will not save you*; #4) *Be outraged*; #5) *Don’t make compromises*; and #6) *Remember the future*. Nicely condensing these six rules in her response to Bee’s plea about what we can each do to resist, Gessen states bluntly: “The thing we can do...is actually to continue panicking. Continue to be the hysteric in the room” - [Bee interrupts, laughing, “I can stay hysterical!”] - Gessen: “Just continue panicking, write a note to yourself of what you would never do, and when you come to the line, don’t cross it.”

The language of authoritarianism is itself rather hysterical. When Trump addresses his supporters at a rally, his words appeal not to reason, or even to folksy common sense, but to emotional instinct. His chants of “Lock her up!,” “Build a wall!,” and “Make America Great Again!”—which range from illegal, to unactionable, to incomprehensible—solicit an overwhelming visceral response from the body of his exuberant supporter. It is precisely the jouissance of Trump’s hysterical rally cries that make their targets (women, LGBTQ+, immigrants, people of color) feel so vulnerable and at risk in Trump’s America. As many have commented, “take Trump seriously, not literally.” If Trump “uses language to assert his power over reality,” authenticating his meaning with hysterical emotion rather than intellectual persuasion, then responding with pervasive panic seems all too proportionate—especially given the autocratic lessons of twentieth-century history.

But what does it mean to “be the hysteric?” At its core, hysteria substitutes for language when language becomes impossible: when words fail, or when I have no chance of making my meaning stick through reasoned argumentation, I, as hysteric, turn to the body and emotions as forms of articulation. For example, nineteenth century female hysterics (who were represented as repressed middle-class women), suffered from fugue states, somnambulism, epileptic fits, and uncontrollable laughing, yawning, and hiccupping attacks in the absence of everyday words. Their theater of bodily symptoms substituted for their exclusion from the rational certitudes and enlightened positivism of masculinist public sphere discourse. Hysteria, not unlike comedic laughter, is an irrational means of expression that erupts from the very limits of conscious reason and symbolic language. (It is perhaps unsurprising that Freud, a preeminent theorist of female hysteria, also argued that women lack the mental apparatus for speaking truth to power as tendentious jokesters.)

In a recent piece on the underbelly of satire, “How Jokes Won the Election,”[xiii] *New Yorker* critic Emily Nussbaum associates the misogynistic, pussy-grabbing, whitelash of Trumpism with “the explosion of female comedy” that “found its roots in everything from the female-cast *Ghostbusters* reboot to the anti-feminist GamerGate movement.” She writes: “Trump’s call to Make America Great Again was a plea to go back in time, to when people knew how to take a joke. It was an election about who owned the mike.” Given the investment in excluding women from the powers of comedic invective, even the milder satire of a widely broadcast show like *Saturday Night Live* can play a politically consequential role in dismantling the oppressive ideologies of Trumpism.

As far as bullies go, Trump is notoriously thin-skinned—he’s waged Twitter wars against comedians including Alec Baldwin, Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, Rosie O’Donnell, and pretty much the entire cast of *SNL*. It is undeniably fun to get Trump’s goat. For example, Melissa McCarthy’s outrageous burlesque of Sean Spicer has already spurred an energetic movement for women to play each member of Trump’s Administration (such as O’Donnell as Steve Bannon, Ellen DeGeneres as Mike Pence, Betty White as Jeff Sessions, and Meryl Streep as Donald Trump).[xiv] Even the laughter of ad hominem satire is still pointed enough to prick the fragile ego of Trumpist authoritarianism.

While the political law-makers are seizing their monopoly on legitimate falsehoods, the satirists must

consolidate their purchase on truthiness. Alongside the facts, absurdist invective has the traction to dislodge falsehoods that are somehow too verifiably inaccurate to debunk through objective or referential means. If fact checking “alt-facts” often feels more absurd than consequential, then why not fight the cynicism of false consciousness with the absurdism of disbelief? It will be a war of consensus between the propaganda of fake-fake news (as disinformation) and the critical apparatus of real-fake news (as comedic truth-telling).

In early February, at a breakfast meeting to kick off Black History Month, Trump made comments praising the 19th century Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, indicating that he has no idea who Douglass actually is and that he still believes Douglass to be alive. Trump proclaimed: he is “an example of somebody who's done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more, I've noticed.” Shortly afterward, the fake Twitter account @realFrederickDouglass was also declaring “MASSIVE VOTER FRAUD that led to black ppl and women not voting for entire first half of U.S. history!”^[xv] In related news, @realFrederickDouglass recently checked in on Facebook and was marked safe at #BowlingGreenMassacre. When the line between #real and verifiably fake has become dangerously obscure, we must also look to satire to show us the truth.

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[i] <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16>

[ii] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pizzagate_conspiracy_theory

[iii] <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/63ite2/the-colbert-report-the-word—truthiness>

[iv]

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/how-kellyanne-conway-ushered-in-the-era-of-alternative-facts/?utm_term=.f037ef4ea981

[v] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bowling_Green_massacre

[vi]

<http://nymag.com/thecut/2017/01/sean-spicer-swallows-35-pieces-of-gum-every-day-before-noon.html>

[vii] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/830047626414477312>

[viii]

<http://www.newyorker.com/humor/borowitz-report/trump-says-he-has-been-treated-very-unfairly-by-people-who-wrote-constitution>

[ix]

<https://grassrootscomedy.com/2017/01/27/michael-moore-fight-donald-trump-with-an-army-of-comedy/>

[x] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwQeKSIY56Q>

[xi] <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/10/trump-election-autocracy-rules-for-survival/>

[xii] <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674003125>

[xiii] <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election>

[xiv] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zac-thompson/snl-should-cast-only-women_b_14642374.html

[xv] <http://onehotmessalaska.blogspot.com/2017/02/frederick-douglass-opens-twitter.html>