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THE NECESSITY OF SATIRE IN MEDIA LITERACY: STEPHEN COLBERT'S USE OF SOPHISTIC AND SOCRATIC IRONY

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ABSTRACT

Media literacy campaigns champion systematic thinking and high elaboration in the fight against fake news. However, they often overlook an ancient tool for discrediting demagogues and destroying disinformation: satire. This essay explores how satirist Stephen Colbert used irony in his 2010 congressional testimony, arguing that Colbert's shift from Socratic to Sophistic irony encouraged listeners to think for themselves through a more central information-processing route. The essay concludes that irony increases recognition of fake news, but warns that an overreliance on Sophistic irony undermines an appreciation of truth, and requires the reintroduction of Socratic irony as a counter balance.

KEYWORDS

Media Literacy, Fake News, Irony, Stephen Colbert

INTRODUCTION

All attempts to overcome fake news through citizen education and media literacy rely on some version of the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion by attempting to train citizens to use central routes of information processing. The underlying theory of elaboration likelihood suggests that message receivers either process information through a central route, involving systematic thinking and a high degree of elaboration, or through a peripheral route, involving cognitive shortcuts and relatively low elaboration.¹ When individuals rely on cognitive shortcuts, they are more susceptible to the influence of fake news, but by simply switching from these peripheral routes to more central routes, the influence of fake news can often be limited if not completely eliminated. One prominent example of the use of elaboration likelihood in combating fake news is the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) infographic "How to Spot Fake News." The IFLA encourages visitors to "Download, print, translate, and share" the infographic, because "the more we crowdsource our wisdom, the wiser the world becomes."² The infographic itself indicates 8 steps patrons can take in order to spot fake news, most of which are typical instructions given to first year composition students, like "Consider the Source," "Check the Author," or "Check the Date," but one step stands out from the rest. It reads, "Is it a Joke? If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure."³ This step is unique, because definitions of fake news typically exclude satire, since satire relies on an audience recognizing the use of irony in order to expose or criticize something. That is, satire encourages audiences to engage central information processing routes rather than peripheral information processing routes. By lumping satire with fake news, the IFLA might be undermining an ancient tool for fighting demagoguery and disinformation, and one of the best pedagogical tools for teaching central route information processing.

Unlike fake news, which uses verifiably false information to intentionally mislead individuals, often for political ends, satire uses irony to critique those in power and expose disinformation. While satire may include a number of additional rhetorical devices, this essay focuses on satirist Stephen Colbert's use of Sophistic irony in his 2010 congressional testimony. While distinguishing between the Socratic irony Colbert frequently employed in his Emmy award winning TV show

¹ Daniel J. O'Keefe, "Elaboration Likelihood Model": 1475; in: Wolfgang Donsbach, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Communication: Vol. IV Digital Imagery - Fictional Media Content* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

² IFLA, "How to Spot Fake News" (July 2018) // <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174>.

³ *Ibid.*

The Colbert Report and the Sophistic irony Colbert uses in his testimony, I argue that irony increases our ability to recognize fake news and mitigate its effect. However, I conclude that an overreliance on Sophistic irony risks desensitization to satire and the introduction of a post-truth mentality; but I suggest that this desensitization may be addressed through the reintroduction of Socratic irony.

As Friday morning dawned on Capitol Hill a raucous din upset the newly changed leaves of fall. A mobile snow machine, spewing a trail of glistening white, crawled from a classy downtown hotel to the congressional hearing room at 2141 Rayburn House Office Building, in its wake pundit, comedian, and show host Stephen T. Colbert cross-country skied to deliver his testimony before the House Judiciary Committee hearing on *Protecting America's Harvest*. Or at least this is the exaggerated situation Colbert predicted. The actual event of the testimony was underwhelming by comparison, yet a television persona, testifying before Congress, about a serious issue, is fascinating in its own right. Unlike previous hearings that invited fictional characters or personae to testify, the hearing on *Protecting America's Harvest* was concerned with a serious matter that affects the daily lives of many Americans. If uncorrected, existing problems with immigration could devastate the U.S. agricultural sector. Harvesting requires neither casual nor unskilled labor, and growers take on a great deal of risk when planting crops that can only be harvested within a relatively brief span of time. The financial risk growers undertake could drive them into bankruptcy in only a single bad season. To address this issue The House of Representatives scheduled a hearing to "explore the labor needs of our Nation's agricultural sector, its attempt to recruit U.S. workers for agricultural labor, the problems with our current visa program for agricultural workers, and potential solutions."⁴ They invited expert witnesses to testify about the potential repercussions in the United States job market, the need for skilled and mobile workers, the current state of agricultural labor in the United States. Chairwoman Zoe Lofgren invited comedian Stephen Colbert to testify about his day working on a farm in upstate New York through the United Farm Workers' "Take Our Job's" campaign.

Colbert is the conservative persona adopted by writer, producer, and director Stephen T. Colbert, first for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and then for the self-titled spin-off *The Colbert Report*. In the latter show, Colbert frequently used Socratic irony in interviews with guests in order to undermine their claims to wisdom and knowledge. In that show Colbert poses as a puerile inquisitor, requesting from an interlocutor a simple definition or position on an issue. Colbert

⁴ U.S. Congress, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law, *Protecting America's Harvest*, 111th Cong. 2d Sess. (2010), Serial No. 111-150, 1.

then engages the person in a dialog that teases out inconsistencies in his or her position. Colbert then shows himself to be the wiser person because he is not claiming to know anything, he is just asking questions, and he holds to a single line of inquiry. Colbert's methods have proved so successful, and damaging, that the current Mayor of Chicago and former Obama Chief-of-Staff Rham Emanuel once warned freshmen members of Congress not to appear on the show. Despite the popularity of this style of interview amongst audience members, Colbert's testimony on September 24 was devoid of Socratic irony. Colbert claimed expertise on issues related to migrant farm labor. He composed and delivered a coherent testimony, which, while full of asides and humorous remarks, was unlike his 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner, which turned into a string of one-liners roasting President George W. Bush. Colbert's speech was still witty and sardonic, but it invited members of Congress, fellow witnesses, members of the press, and the entire present and extended audience to recognize the humor of the speech and its critique of the proceedings.

1. COLBERT'S INVITATION TO TESTIFY

In order to find subjects for his work Colbert occasionally had to step out from behind his desk and get his hands dirty. During discussion of the controversial Arizona immigration bill in the summer of 2010, Colbert interviewed United Farm Workers of America president, Arturo Rodriguez. At the conclusion of the interview, Colbert agreed to take part in the UFW's Take Our Jobs campaign and work for a day as a migrant fieldworker. Colbert kept his promise and spent 10 hours working on a farm in upstate New York picking beans and packing corn. While recording footage of the experience for his show, Colbert also interviewed fellow fieldworker-for-a-day Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren, who agreed to an on-location interview, and invited Colbert to testify before the House Judiciary Committee hearing on *Protecting America's Harvest*.

The timbre of the hearing was serious and austere. Representative Lofgren opened the hearing by commenting; "we realize there is great interest in the plight of migrant farm workers in America" but instructed that the press, primarily there to capture Colbert's appearance, should pull back from the table so that the subcommittee members can see all four witnesses.⁵ Lofgren also tells the gallery that Capitol Police will remove them if any show of approval or disapproval during the witness testimonies is observed. She then concludes that Colbert "has joined that group of celebrities who will use their media position to benefit others" and

⁵ *Ibid.*

"his actions are a good example of how using both levity and fame, a media figure can bring attention to a critically important issue for the good of the Nation."⁶ Then, Representative Conyers in his opening remarks thanks Colbert for filling the room and bringing media attention to the hearing, but suggests, "now that we have got all this attention, that you excuse yourself and that you let us get on with the three witnesses and all the other members there."⁷ Conyers clarifies that he is asking Colbert not to talk, and to leave the Committee room completely.

At the chairwoman's intervention Colbert is allowed to stay, but it is clear that the majority of the committee members see him as a distraction, not a witness. This is the same reaction reporters had about Colbert's testimony. The *Christian Science Monitor* reports Representative Darrell Issa's comment, "The fact that congressional Democrats used their time and effort today to get Stephen Colbert to testify before the House Judiciary Committee while refusing to allow a straight-up-or-down vote on extending tax cuts for all Americans is an embarrassment."⁸ The *Houston Chronicle* reports, "As if this display of unseriousness—no budget, no appropriations bill, no tax bill –was not enough, some genius on a House Judiciary subcommittee invites parodist Stephen Colbert to testify as an expert witness on immigration."⁹ Wired.com reported that "Although it will be Colbert the fake journalist who weighs in on the United Farm Workers' 'Take Our Jobs' initiative" Colbert's testimony would be "very *real*."¹⁰ Yet the reporter comments that Colbert's appearance before the subcommittee is "exactly a TV stunt, because that is what politics has become in our densely internetworked new century."¹¹ The *Los Angeles Times* concurs, reporting, "It turns out that the real joke was not *on* Congress but *by* Congress, or at least some of its members. They and their fellow travelers in the punditocracy wouldn't or couldn't wrap their minds around the idea that satirists are citizens too. And that they are often the citizens with a way of cutting right to the guts of a matter."¹²

The reporters could not get a consistent sense of what Colbert's testimony would mean. Some agreed that Colbert was making a mockery of Congress, others that he was raising awareness about an important issue. In part the division was over the role Colbert would play while testifying. It was widely reported that Colbert would testify in character, but there was no consensus about what this would

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ Gail Russell Chaddock, "Bush Tax Cuts: Democrats Punt Until After Midterm Elections," *Christian Science Monitor* (Sep. 24, 2010).

⁹ Charles Krauthammer, "Voters Will Not be Amused by Congress' Antics," *Houston Chronicle* (Oct. 10, 2010).

¹⁰ Scott Thill, "Stephen Colbert's Testimony Will Further Blur Political Reality," *Underwire, Wired.com* (Sep. 24, 2010).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² James Rainey, "On the Media: Stephen Colbert Heads to Washington, and Congress and Media Play the Joker," *Los Angeles Times* (Sep. 25, 2010).

mean. As noted earlier, Colbert's character sometimes invited viewers to participate in his interpretation of the news by playfully engaging his satire of a news show, or his paradoxical statements, or his ironic twist on news of the day. At other times, in Colbert's interviews for example, he entertains his audience by playing dumb with a guest, and making that guest show his or her hypocrisy and foolishness, thus employing a form of Socratic irony. However, in his testimony Colbert chose to employ Sophistic irony.

2. SOPHISTIC IRONY IN GORGIAS'S *ENCOMIUM OF HELEN*

While Socratic irony is concerned with finding out the limits of human wisdom by showing that all one can claim to know is how little one knows, Sophistic irony plays with possibilities through interaction with the audience and the use of tropes. Through these playful opportunities, the audience skips ahead, reaching conclusions before the speaker states them. Gorgias provides an example of sophistic irony through the tropes he uses in his *Encomium of Helen*. Through parody, paradox, and frigidity, Gorgias invites his audience's playful participation, both entertaining them with his speech and instructing them in ancient media literacy. In order to fully appreciate Gorgias's speech, his audience would need to process its tropes through a central route, thus actively participating in the ironic critique and learning how to repeat Gorgias's methods on their own. The following paragraphs treat on these themes from Gorgias style in order to show how Sophistic irony works, and why Gorgias and Colbert employ it.

Consigny defines parody as playfully standing alongside various established genres in the culture, and adapting to its conventions while playfully differentiating writing and speaking from the conventions of that genre.¹³ In the *Encomium*, Gorgias mainly parodies common understandings of Helen. She was roundly condemned as a traitor by all the poets and "a woman about whom there is univocal and unanimous testimony among those who have believed the poets."¹⁴ Her name had become a byword, a memorial of disasters, so Gorgias stated goal of freeing Helen from blame and proving her critics liars was impossible, unless he was merely playing, writing a speech "that would be Helen's encomium and [Gorgias'] *paignion*" his plaything, his amusement.¹⁵ Thus, Gorgias speech follows patterns of an encomium, but stands playfully outside its patterns by praising a woman universally condemned as unworthy of praise.

¹³ Scott Consigny, *Gorgias: Sophist and Artist* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 168.

¹⁴ Gorgias, "Encomium of Helen": 252; in: Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, translated by George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 265.

Part of Gorgias' parody is that he employs *hypokrisis*, and the *alazon*. *Hypokrisis*, Consigny defines as, "the art of acting, which involves the use of vocal intonations, facial expressions, physical gestures and movements, costume, and cosmetics" enabling Gorgias to create a character for himself, "the character of a legal champion of a reviled woman."¹⁶ Furthermore, within this characterization, Gorgias adopts the manner of the *alazon*, a charlatan frequently portrayed in Greek comedy as the boastful phony who makes exaggerated claims about his knowledge or ability.¹⁷ Through *alazon* and *hypokrisis* Gorgias constantly winks at his audience, allowing them to see that, while every claim is serious within the context of the speech, the claims are bound in by that context. Once Gorgias shifts out of character, the dubious claims are no longer his to defend. Unlike Socrates who will continue unwavering in his assertions, Gorgias can allow his boastful *alazon* character to deflate, abandoning the assertions contingent on his old role and its situated perceptions, and simply taking up a new role with new and equally partisan and partial assertions.

In addition to parody, Gorgias also uses paradox to invite his audience's participation in his *Encomium of Helen*. Consigny defines Gorgias use of paradox by referring to the original Greek construction of the word, which means "that which both stands alongside and transgresses or confutes *doxa*, conventional opinion, or belief," challenges conventional ideas."¹⁸ Consigny also notes that these paradoxes may be as simple as the lines 7, 8, and 18: "He did dread deeds; she suffered them,"¹⁹ "Speech is a powerful lord that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplishes most godlike works,"²⁰ and "whenever pictures of many colors and figures create a perfect image of a single figure and form, they delight the sight."²¹ In the first paradox, one would expect the doer of a deed to suffer its consequences, in the second, one would expect a powerful lord to have large and visible body, and in the third paradox challenging conventional ideas, one would expect the conflagration of colors and images to create unpleasant mess rather than a single delightful figure and form. A paradox may also be more complex such as the paradox of Helen's paternity, about which Gorgias says in line 3: "for it is clear that Leda was her mother, while as a father she had in fact a god, though allegedly a mortal, the latter Tyndareus, the former Zeus; and of these the one seemed her father because he was, and the other was disproved because he was

¹⁶ Scott Consigny, *supra* note 13, 189-90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁹ Gorgias, *supra* note 14: 253.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 253.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 255.

only said to be; and one was the greatest of men, the other lord of all.”²² In these paradoxes, Gorgias invites his audience to participate in the ideas he proposes, as Consigny notes, “By altering conventional notions and hence fusing ostensibly divergent categories of thought, Gorgias creates striking new ideas that confound common sense and that invite his audience to reconsider their commonplace notions.”²³ Rather than showing us truth, Gorgias is teaching us a method for systematically interrogating our preconceptions through a central information processing route, while entertaining us with paradoxes.

When discussing frigidities, Aristotle uses Gorgias’ speeches as examples of inappropriately adopting poetic style. “Even now,” Aristotle asserts, “the majority of the uneducated think such speakers [as Gorgias] speak most beautifully. This is not the case, but the [proper] *lexis* of prose differs from that of poetry.”²⁴ Of the first frigidity, double words, Aristotle says, “all these seem poetic because of doubling.”²⁵ Consigny explains that this accusation of frigidity is meant to indicate Gorgias’ ineptitude as a writer, “but for Gorgias, each of these putative frigidities is part of his strategy of exposing the artifices used by every rhetor.”²⁶ Thus, conflating two existing words to create a new word, thereby “suggesting that familiar words may always be given new roles to play and hence new meanings in new situations” or by fusing two terms, “Gorgias challenges the assumption that words and things are independent items, the former representing, or mirroring the latter.”²⁷

Aristotle does not define the second frigidity, glosses, but Kennedy suggests that Aristotle means “anything that sounds strange and might puzzle an audience.”²⁸ Consigny expands glosses to include “words that are peripheral to ordinary use because they are strange, provincial, archaic, or obsolete and that require a glossary in order to be understood.”²⁹ This, though, is in keeping with the style Consigny has assigned to Gorgias, for it “implies that discourse is anchored in the local biases of its users, that words are the tools of locally situated speakers, and that consequently the meaning of a word involves situating it in a particular discourse.”³⁰

The third frigidity Aristotle identifies is the use of epithets, but only those that are long, untimely or frequent because such epithets “convict [the writer of

²² *Ibid.*: 252.

²³ Scott Consigny, *supra* note 13, 178-79.

²⁴ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, translated by George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 196.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁶ Scott Consigny, *supra* note 13, 179.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁸ Kennedy, note 38, in: Aristotle, *supra* note 24, 203.

²⁹ Scott Consigny, *supra* note 13, 180.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

artificiality] and make it clear that this is 'poetry.'"³¹ Thus one might consider Gorgias frequent use of the phrase "godlike beauty" in connection with Helen a frigidity. However, Consigny sees these epithets as contingent characteristics. That is, Gorgias describes Helen's beauty as godlike having stated that her father is Zeus, and he wishes to continually bring our attention back to this parentage. Likewise, Consigny argues that Gorgias never names Paris, only alluding to him as Alexander, because Gorgias, "in effect avoids that reification, and instead situates Hector's brother in a new way, providing him with a new family of associations, leading us to view him from yet another perspective, and reminding us that there is no viewpoint apart from the various possible perspectives made possible by our language."³²

The fourth and final frigidity occurs in metaphors. There are three types of metaphors that Aristotle condemns as frigid: those that are laughable, those that are too lofty and tragic, and those that are unclear, due to being far-fetched. He then cites examples from Gorgias and Alcidas to show humorous and tragic metaphors. Gorgias, on the occasion of a bird defecating on his head, exclaims "Shame on you, Philomela" which Aristotle takes as an example of "the best tragic manner" because "if a bird did it there was no shame, but [it would have been] shameful for a maiden."³³ However, Aristotle has listed tragic metaphors as frigid for being too lofty. (What could be loftier than a transmogrified maiden flying through the air shitting on rhetoricians?) But, as Kennedy notes, translation to English and two thousand and more years have dulled the ears for many metaphors.³⁴

Aristotle cites two of Gorgias' phrases as examples of the far-fetched metaphor, the phrase "You have sown shamefully and have reaped badly" and the phrase "pale and bloodless doings,"³⁵ but Consigny defends Gorgias metaphors as "paratropic or parodic in the sense that they depend on conventional metaphoric associations but exaggerate them in various ways."³⁶ Aristotle's complaint with these metaphors is that in the first, "doings" are unrelated to "paleness" and in the second agriculture is unrelated to virtue. In both instances Gorgias, according to Aristotle, fails to "bring before the eyes" a relationship between the two elements of his metaphors because either they lack activity, which is *energeia*, or the audience does not immediately understand them. However, Aristotle's objections are based on taste. These metaphors lack urbanity according to one hearer, and when one

³¹ Aristotle, *supra* note 24, 203.

³² Scott Consigny, *supra* note 13, 180.

³³ Aristotle, *supra* note 24, 204.

³⁴ Kennedy, note 47, in: Aristotle, *supra* note 24, 204.

³⁵ Aristotle, *supra* note 24, 204.

³⁶ Scott Consigny, *supra* note 13, 182.

considers the purpose of the text is not to be urban, but to teach the process of analogizing, Gorgias' metaphors are appropriate because "the far-fetched metaphor draws our attention to the process of metaphoric analogizing as well as to the putative entities being analogized."³⁷

The texts we have from Gorgias are intended as instruction for his students. However, they were not merely intended for rote memorization; they were for analysis and emulation. Thus, Gorgias reveals the structure of established genres by parodying them. He reveals how conventional ideas may be challenged through paradox. He also reveals how metaphors analogize through frigidity. As students study and emulate the *Encomium of Helen*, they are able to see the potential for reading the speech as a defense of Rhetoric. Just as Gorgias is playfully imitating the genre of encomium, students would be expected to imitate Gorgias. His parodic style makes imitation easier, as students participate in unraveling Gorgias speech, making sense of his metaphors and unraveling his paradoxes. By contrast, Socrates prevents this easy learning, requiring nothing of his interlocutor but response. Time to think is denied, else Socrates will answer for them; revision is denied, else Socrates catch them out in inconsistency; and the audience is denied, for Socrates is only interested in converting his interlocutor. While both Socrates and Gorgias seek to teach, and both use irony as a tool in their instruction, Socratic irony is mocking, derisive and ultimately anti-participatory. Sophistic irony, by comparison, is fundamentally participatory, using parody, paradox and frigidity to invite the audience to play with ideas, concepts, and forms.

3. SOPHISTIC IRONY IN COLBERT'S TESTIMONY

Colbert's testimony is a parody of congressional testimony. His style apes that of the other witnesses that morning, and playfully differs from the genre of testimony. All four witnesses begin their testimonies by acknowledging the committee, thanking them for their time, and stating the group or groups they represent. They then refer to outside sources to support their claims, make reference to the UFW Take Our Jobs campaign, and conclude with a plea for Congress to intervene in the agricultural labor crisis. By looking at these testimonies, and how Colbert's testimony riffs on them, one sees how Colbert is parodying congressional testimony.

The first witness, Dr. Carol Swain, claims to speak "on behalf of millions of Americans who would like to see immigration laws vigorously enforced."³⁸ The second witness, Phil Glaize, testifies "on behalf of the U.S. Apple Association and

³⁷ Scott Consigny, *supra* note 13, 182.

³⁸ U.S. Congress, *supra* note 4, 12.

the Agriculture Coalition For Immigration Reform.”³⁹ The third witness, Arturo Rodriguez, testifies as president of the United Farm Workers of America. Colbert, however, merely states, “I am an American citizen” and “I am happy to use my celebrity to draw attention to this important, complicated issue.”⁴⁰ Colbert is parodying the statements of the other witnesses, coming beside them in function, stating whom he represents and why his constituency deserves to be heard, yet playfully mocking them in that Colbert represents himself, and as a celebrity he deserves to be heard.

After her initial remarks, Dr. Swain turns to experts for material to support her arguments. She cites Philip Martin, and his “extensive studies of farm labor in the areas of fruit and vegetable production” and Mr. Don Kerr, who created a pilot program for getting unemployed Americans working in the field of farm labor.⁴¹ To support his testimony, Mr. Glaze references un-named apple growers in the Northeast who had a “near disaster when decisions by the State Department and the U.S. citizenship and immigration services put applications of hundreds of Jamaican workers in jeopardy just days before the grower needed them to start harvest.”⁴² Mr. Rodriguez does not refer to researchers or professional growers, but to five farm workers who accompanied him to the hearing: “Isabel Rojas [who] has 40 years working in the fields...Rogelio Luna...46 years working in the fields...Amparo Flores...33 years working in the fields...Alfredo Zamora... 34 years working in the fields.”⁴³ Each of these witnesses relied on relevant outside sources to corroborate and provide support for their testimony. Colbert tried to introduce a video of his colonoscopy. He claimed that the best solution to the problem of migrant farm labor was to stop eating fruits and vegetables but, his gastroenterologist, Dr. Eichler, informed him “in no uncertain terms that they are a necessary source of roughage.”⁴⁴ Like the other witnesses, Colbert introduces an expert in a field, but his expert has nothing to do with the subject of the hearing. Thus Colbert’s references an outside expert in a way that playfully parodies the form of citation the other witnesses brought to bear.

Because the UFW Take Our Jobs campaign was one of the reasons the hearing took place, every witness makes mention of it. The campaign helps place out-of-work Americans in agriculture jobs through their website takeourjobs.org. Dr. Swain condemns the initiative as a publicity stunt, which “entirely or perhaps deliberately misses the point”, that the most disadvantaged Americans cannot

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

compete with low-skilled guest workers.⁴⁵ Mr. Glaize notes that the campaign is “only the latest in a series of unsuccessful efforts in good and bad times in Michigan, in Washington, in California and elsewhere to recruit American’s into farm jobs” concluding that he, as a grower, isn’t surprised no one wants to take a job in harvesting because it is both seasonal and demanding.⁴⁶ Mr. Rodriguez, who helped start the campaign, notes that since the campaign started 8,600 people have made inquiries about finding positions, “but only seven people have accepted those jobs on a full-time basis and continue to work in agriculture.”⁴⁷ Colbert begins by mocking a fellow witness: “I am sure Arturo Rodriguez is saying, ‘Who, then, would pick our crops Stephen?’ First of all, Arturo, don’t interrupt me when I am talking; that is rude.”⁴⁸ Colbert then describes how he came to participate in the campaign, admitting that his preconceptions about migrant labor were abandoned after he realized how long and how hard it was to pick beans and pack corn. Again, Colbert parodies the testimony of the other witnesses, pillorying Arturo Rodriguez, and, though seriously relating the hardships of migrant labor, turning it into a joke by concluding, “please don’t make me do this again. It is really, really hard” with a quivering lip and tearing eyes.

Just as each witness began by thanking the committee for hearing his or her testimony, each witness concluded with an appeal for congressional intervention. Dr. Swain simply stated, “Congress needs to do something about reforming immigration, and they need to protect the most disadvantaged Americans.”⁴⁹ Mr. Glaize concluded, “I am extremely supportive of AgJOBS legislation. Comprehensive reform may be too politically charged right now. Please focus on AgJOBS and get it passed.”⁵⁰ Mr. Rodriguez argued that Congress should acknowledge its role in creating the current farm labor crisis and “acknowledge the dignity of the current farm labor workforce and ensure the safety and abundance of America’s food supply by passing the AgJOBS bill.”⁵¹ Colbert ended his testimony with the only comment that elicited audible laughter in recordings of his testimony. “I trust that, following my testimony, both sides will work together on this issue in the best interest of the American people, as you always do.”⁵² He then concluded, “I am now prepared to take your questions and/or pose for pictures for the grandchildren. I yield the balance of my times. USA—number one!”⁵³ Colbert again parodies the form of congressional testimony, concluding not with an appeal for congress to take

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

action, but suggesting in a serious tone that Congress would do what is best for the American people.

In this final example of parody, Colbert is also using *hypokrisis* and the *alazon* character. Here, and throughout his testimony, Colbert employs *hypokrisis*, playing a character for the crowd. While his costume and cosmetics do not stand out, his vocal intonations, facial expressions, physical gestures and movements clearly show that he is playing a part. The way he furrows his brow, raising his eyebrows, and holding eye contact with the camera attempts to convey sincerity and conviction. Through his intonation, he emphasizes incongruities within his testimony: one day of work qualifying him as an expert, Americans not eating fruits and vegetables, equating migrant workers to a slave labor force. He also uses his intonation, expressions, and gestures to make asides, introducing doubt about the claims of Dr. Swain, Representative King, and others who claim that the problem is illegal immigration rather than the conditions of migrant workers. In his use of *hypokrisis*, Colbert is acting out the part of the *alazon*, boastfully claiming wisdom over all areas of knowledge. He acts sincere, not only when claiming that his one-day of work makes him an expert, but also when he agrees that we need stronger borders, when he states that migrant labor is really, really hard, when he reminds the committee that American agriculture is shifting to Mexico, and also when he argues that improved legal status for immigrants could have a net positive effect across the agricultural sector. Because Colbert is playing out a character, and a particularly bombastic character, he is able to wink and nod at his audience, reminding them that they should play along with his character, and not take things too seriously, while at the same time showing that the serious arguments of other witnesses may likewise be an artifice disguising a decaying structure.

Using parody, Colbert, like Gorgias, invites his audience to participate in his speech. Colbert's bombastic declamations, his *hypokrisis*, and his imitating the form of other witnesses invites the audience to participate in the speech by pondering the legitimacy not only of his testimony, but that of the other witnesses as well. He invites us to question the usefulness of the hearing itself: will both sides work together on this issue in the net interest of the American people? Or do they merely make claims aping the process of legislative proceedings while employing *hypokrisis* to play out the role of the *alazon*? Colbert's satiric performance encourages the audience to move from peripheral processing routes to central processing routes.

In addition to parody, Colbert uses paradox to invite his audiences' participation in his testimony. Colbert's paradoxes are frequent and easily spotted. He claims vast experience from one day as a migrant farm worker, that the obvious answer to the farm labor crisis is to stop eating fruits and vegetables, not to know

that soil is at ground level, that seasonal migrant fieldworker is an exciting career, not wanting the government to intervene yet demanding government intervention, vegetables that pick themselves, and Congress working together in the best interest of the people. All of these small statements stand alongside the statements of the other witness and they challenge the conventional ideas proposed in those other statements. While some paradoxes are merely facetious, others invite the audience to ponder conventional opinions and beliefs. Would Americans really take jobs as migrant farm workers? Could such a job be a career? Should the government intervene? Colbert engages all of these possibilities as he fuses ideas such as seasonal migrant fieldwork and an exciting career.

Turning now from paradox to frigidity, Colbert does use double words in his speech, but they do not have the same frigid effect in English they might have in ancient Greek. For example, in one of Colbert's signature segments, "The Word," he created the word *truthiness*: "suggesting that familiar words may always be given new roles to play and hence new meanings in new situations," and the word was almost immediately added to the official word bank of English. Therefore his use of "semi-mythical," "Fall-Back," "waste-high," "free-market," and "human-fruit" is almost urban. Glosses, Aristotle's second frigidity, are so much a part of the English language that even the term is a gloss. Colbert does not use Aristotle's third frigidity, long, untimely, or frequent epithets, as such. However, he does use what Consigny calls, in his analysis of Gorgias, contingent characteristics. As when Colbert states, "I don't want a tomato picked by a Mexican. I want it picked by an American—then sliced by a Guatemalan and served by a Venezuelan in a spa where a Chilean gives me a Brazilian."⁵⁴ In this example Colbert plays with the assumed characteristics of the immigrant, denying the reification of all migrant field workers as Mexicans. However, Colbert accomplishes this more through the paradoxes discussed above than through contingent characteristics in epithet like statements.

These first frigidities offer little room for participation, and little insight into Colbert's use of sophistic irony, but his frigid metaphor of the invisible hand of the market is more participatory. Colbert says that he would normally leave the problem of seasonal migrant fieldwork to the invisible hand of the market, but "the invisible hand of the market has already moved over 84,000 acres of production and over 22,000 farm jobs to Mexico and shut down over a million acres of U.S. farm land due to lack of available labor, because, apparently, even the invisible hand doesn't want to pick beans."⁵⁵ Colbert's metaphor is laughable because it exaggerates conventional metaphoric associations, and is therefore frigid. While

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

Colbert's metaphor succeeds in bringing before the eyes the motion of the invisible hand as it moves agricultural industry to Mexico, its refusal to pick beans and general exaggeration requires the audience to delve more deeply into the metaphor of the free-market as an invisible hand than they normally would. While this frigid metaphor does not necessarily show the processes of metaphoric analogizing like Gorgias's metaphors do, it does require audience participation. One is asked to playfully engage with Colbert's idea, as it becomes clear that one has "learned something different from what [one] believed, and [one's] mind seems to say, 'How true, and I was wrong'" thereby pleasing the listener.⁵⁶

Though in his interviews Colbert uses Socratic irony to deflate his interlocutors, during his testimony before Congress Colbert employed a different ironic form, one that Gorgias uses in his speeches, allowing listeners to playfully participate through Sophistic irony. By exploring how Colbert uses parody, paradox, and frigidity one sees how Colbert invites his audience to participate in his oration. Listeners are not merely shown the braggadocio of a foolish interlocutor – they are invited into the joke. As listeners, we are offered an opportunity to listen for what Colbert means, but does not say. We read American exceptionalism into a statement about an invisible hand not picking beans, because the metaphor is a laughable extension of a familiar free-market trope. When we hear false bravado in Colbert's opening remarks, but see a wink and nod we must ask ourselves: is Colbert only pretending to testify, and are the other witnesses pretending as well? When Colbert's testimony follows the same patterns, adapting to the nomenclature and norms of congressional testimony, yet departing from these guides in playful ways, we begin to wonder if Congress itself is merely following empty holding patterns.

However, if one ceases to recognize Sophistic irony as satire, then one becomes susceptible to a post-truth mentality. Sophistic irony is not a tool that unravels the mysteries of the universe, uncovering hypocrisy and toppling braggarts. Rather sophistic irony highlights the fabrication of rhetorical form. Gorgias' speeches are instructional text meant for students to study, not merely repeat. They allow listeners to participate in the speech by jumping ahead of the orator, making connections that had not yet been spoken; or, additionally, they allow listeners pause to consider the construction of particularly lofty lines, noting how two unrelated words may be brought together thus forming a new understanding about an old concept. Colbert's testimony accomplishes this aim. His use of parody, paradox, and frigidity allow his audience to play with their preconceptions about migrant farm labor, and consider whether they too should

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *supra* note 24, 223.

have a tomato picked by an American, who just happens to be a temporary legal immigrant from Mexico. But, if the audience processes the speech through a peripheral route, uncritically accepting Colbert's performance, then another form of irony could be introduced to revitalize satiric critique: Socratic irony.

4. SATIRICAL NEWS AND SOCRATIC IRONY

Today Colbert's celebrity has continued to grow through his work on the major broadcast network talk show *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* – a show that uses notably less satire than his previous work. Earlier Colbert was most well-known for his spin-off of the *Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, which is a parody of shows like the now-off-the-air *The O'Reilly Factor*. Episodes of *The Colbert Report* would generally begin with Colbert offering an exaggeratedly conservative interpretation of news and current events. He would then segue into segments that carry out a larger comedic arch, like "Better Know a District," in which Colbert interviews the congressperson for a district, or the segment "Stephen Colbert's Fall-Back Position" in which he tries out other jobs. The show would generally conclude with an interview in which Colbert either attempts to trip up his guests, or holds unwaveringly to a ridiculous position.

There is something familiar to students of Plato's dialogues in Colbert's interviews on *The Colbert Report*. One experiences voyeuristic enjoyment while watching Colbert deflate a bombastic rival or sometimes merely make a mockery of the position he claims to hold. Colbert might be as guilty of corrupting the youth of America as Socrates was of corrupting the youth of Athens because he uses the same humble pose as Plato's teacher to draw his interlocutor's false premises to light. Colbert invites guests onto his show because they consider themselves experts in a field, but through the tools of Socratic irony, Colbert exposes their ineptness in the field in which they claim expertise. Colbert's approach in these interviews requires systematic elaboration, and this leads audiences to perceive that neither Colbert nor his guest really knows anything.

The crux of Socratic irony is the *iron*, the posture of humility, assumed by Socrates when he engages in dialogue. This posture allows Socrates to show the pomposity and bombast of his interlocutor, who, claiming to know some truth or have access to super-human wisdom, is defeated by Socrates who merely has recourse to human wisdom. Socrates explains his method in *Socrates' Defense*, where he states that he has gained a reputation from nothing more than a limited kind of human wisdom, which he contrasts with Evenus of Paros, Hippias of Elis, Prodicus of Ceos, and Gorgias of Leontini who "are wise in a wisdom that is more

than human.”⁵⁷ Socrates then clarifies that he “certainly [has] no knowledge of such wisdom” and anyone who says otherwise “is a liar and willful slanderer” because no such wisdom exists outside the claims of liars and slanderers.⁵⁸ Socrates supports this assertion by calling on the god at Delphi as his witness. Socrates’ friend Chaerephon visited the god and asked whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. The priestess replied that no man was wiser than Socrates. Upon hearing this Socrates said to himself “I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small,”⁵⁹ and proceeded to inspect those who, in many people’s opinions, and especially their own, appeared to be wise. In every instance Socrates found that he was wiser than the individual he inspected, but “neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something where he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance...and to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.”⁶⁰ Socrates is wiser than those he inspects. Thus, the irony is that Socrates, who claims not to be wise, is wiser than his interlocutor, who claims to be exceptionally wise, because Socrates knows both that he is not wise and that his interlocutor is not wise.

When interviewing Eleanor Holmes Norton, the Congresswomen for the District of Columbia, Colbert feigns humility, allowing Norton to teach him a civics lesson about The District. Colbert asks a series of questions, allowing Representative Norton enough rope to hang herself. He opens by asking why Representative Norton has never voted in Congress. He then uses her answer, that the people of The District are being taxed without representation, to argue that the District of Columbia, because it is not in a state, is not part of the United States of America. He holds to this argument throughout the remainder of the interview, forcing Representative Norton into exposing her pomposity and bombast. One example would be the discussion of origins, wherein Norton asks where Colbert is from commenting, “anybody who pronounces Col-Bert *Colbert* is not from the United States.”⁶¹ Colbert cites the example of Louisiana, remarking, “when was the last time you had a ben-yet?”⁶² Representative Norton concludes by emphatically claiming Colbert is from “Paris or one of its environs.”⁶³ Without Plato to edit his dialogue into appropriately ironic form, Colbert relies on video editing techniques to highlight Representative Norton’s bombastic pomposity. Shots of the representative

⁵⁷ Plato, “Socrates’ Defense (Apology),” translated by Hugh Tredennick: 7; in: Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *The Colbert Report*, “Exclusive, Better Know a District, District of Columbia, Eleanor Holmes Norton,” Comedy Central (July 27, 2006).

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

show her looking frustrated and disgusted. While Colbert remains calm and collected, Representative Norton becomes increasingly agitated. Colbert's innocence and naïveté, his posture as *ieron*, serve to show that, while he might not know his civics, neither does Representative Norton, and at least Colbert hasn't claimed the civic wisdom requisite of a United States Congressperson.

CONCLUSIONS

In analyzing *The Colbert Report's* segment, "Better Know a District," Geoffrey Baym concludes that the segment serves to fill the void in viewer's knowledge about "the governmental branch most directly entrusted with the task of representing the people" by "heightening public awareness" and at the same time providing issue exposure "calling attention to a wide range of political debates and legislative priorities."⁶⁴ Furthermore, Baym notes that Colbert's approach to informing his audience suggests that political comprehension "need not carry the onerous weight of citizenship, but can be a source of pleasure, a leisure-time activity that can compete in an entertainment-saturated environment."⁶⁵ While Baym notes the danger of "politics as play" Sandra Borden and Chad Tew in their article on the ethical lessons of fake news, argue that Jon Stewart, former host of *The Daily Show*, and Stephen Colbert in his former role on *The Colbert Report* "do not inhabit the role of journalists" and all of the moral responsibility that comes with informing the public about important issues; rather, "they function as media critics with quasi-insider status."⁶⁶ Additionally, Don Waisanen, in his analysis of Stewart and Colbert's comic rhetorical criticism, argues that through their humor they are "daily analyzing and dissecting public discourse, while reminding or instructing their audiences about moral democratic possibilities."⁶⁷

Not all critics see Colbert as a contributor to political discourse. Lance Bennett, in analyzing critics of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, argues that many persist in taking these comedic news pundits too seriously, and then condemning for not being serious enough.⁶⁸ For example, Bennet notes, when Jon Stewart appeared on the former CNN program *Crossfire*, "he was chided by the conservative personality Tucker Carlson for not asking presidential candidate John

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Baym, "Representation and the Politics of Play: Stephen Colbert's *Better Know a District*," *Political Communication* Vol. 24, (2007): 373 // <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600701641441>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Sandra L. Borden and Chad Tew, "The Role of Journalist and the Performance of Journalism: Ethical Lessons from "Fake" News (Seriously)," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* Vol. 22, No. 4 (2007): 311.

⁶⁷ Don J. Waisanen, "A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism," *Southern Communication Journal* Vol. 74, No. 2 (2009): 134 // <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802428212>.

⁶⁸ W. Lance Bennett, "Relief in Hard Times: A Defense of Jon Stewart's Comedy in an Age of Cynicism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007): 279 // DOI: 10.1080/07393180701521072.

Kerry tough questions during an interview.”⁶⁹ Stewart replies by chiding Carlson for looking to satire for journalistic standards. Bennet argues that Stewart was both accusing *Crossfire* of avoiding “serious illumination of the issues of the day,” and implying that Carlson was merely “a performance artist who cynically used issues and events as vehicles for ideological and insider posturing.”⁷⁰ While many reporters panned Stewart and Colbert as mere entertainment, others charged them with corrupting the youth of America. However, Dannagal Young and Russel Tisinger found in their study of news consumption among late-night comedy viewers that “young people are not watching late-night comedy as their exclusive news or instead of traditional news” instead, “they are watching both.”⁷¹ Young and Tisinger found that, rather than corrupting the youth of America, satire serves as a gateway to consumption of more traditional news outlets. One must know what is in the news, they argue, in order to understand and enjoy satirizing.

The purpose of Socratic irony is the revelation of truth. By denying audience participation, Colbert and Socrates attempt to force audiences to recognize falsity. For Colbert, this counterbalances the Sophistic irony of his testimony. As a Sophist, Colbert teaches us to process information critically, where as a Socratic satirist he forced us to wrestle with truth. When watching *The Colbert Report*, one was not allowed to consider possible alternatives, rather one was given a series of diametrically opposed positions where Colbert would consistently argue from a single perspective thereby forcing his interlocutor to either admit a mistake in reasoning, or contradict himself. In either case, the interlocutor was shown to be a haughty fool, puffed up with false claims of wisdom. The reintroduction of Socratic irony thus counterbalances the potential desensitization to satire brought about by an overabundance of Sophistic irony. However, both are important tools in mitigating the effects of fake news and teaching citizens media literacy. While the IFLA’s infographic for spotting fake news is helpful, its inclusion of satire as a potential source of fake news indicates a need for more satire that teaches through Sophistic irony, and critiques through Socratic irony.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Dannagal G. Young and Russell M. Tisinger, “Dispelling Late-Night Myths: News Consumption among Late-Night Comedy Viewers and the Predictors of Exposure to Various Late-Night Shows,” *Press/Politics* Vol. 11, No. 3 (2006): 128 // <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X05286042>.

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