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Paul Achter

University of Richmond, pachter@richmond.edu

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Comedy in unfunny times: News parody and carnival after 9/11

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Introduction

For almost three weeks after the terror attacks in 2001, comedians in the U.S. embarked on an unusually serious assessment of comedy and its proper role in public life. The attacks had prompted a moment of pause among highly visible comedians, including Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien, who moved uncomfortably into serious reflection on the meaning of the events only after taking weeklong breaks from filming shows. Comedy Central's popular "fake news" program, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, aired reruns for two weeks (Kim, 2001). Letterman articulated his anxiety about performing: "I wasn't sure that I should be doing a television show, because for 20 years we've been in the city making fun of everything ... So to come to this circumstance that is so desperately sad—and I don't trust my judgment" ("Remarks," 2001). Opening his first post-9/11 show, Conan O'Brien assessed the task of comedy after 9/11 and echoed the comments of Letterman: "I've made a career of getting in way over my head," O'Brien said, adding that he had, "never, ever felt more unsure or more at a loss than I do tonight. I will not lie to you. I—I—I don't exactly know how we're going to do this, but we're going to try to do it." ("TV's late night comics," 2001). Restraint also marked the 2001 Primetime Emmy Awards, which were initially postponed. When the Academy of Television Arts announced that the show would move forward, the group said it would drop jokes between awards "to do something that helps, not something that offends" (Levin, 2001, p. 4C). Likewise, *Saturday Night Live's* (SNL) 27th season was set to kick off on September 29, 2001, but producer Lorne Michaels was worried about the timing of his show and eager to register an appropriate response to 9/11. With the blessing of New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Michaels scheduled the show and Giuliani agreed to appear during the opening segment. Once the two were onstage Michaels asked Giuliani, "Is it okay to be funny again?" Giuliani's response, "Why start now?" led by example, and was widely seen as sanction of

comedy and of the value of laughter in public culture (Shales and Miller, 2002, p. 506). Giuliani's benediction of comedy on *SNL* is instructive. Paralleling his mobilization of America's first city—its firefighters, police officers, and victims of the attacks—Giuliani had now mobilized a comic institution in the service of a country's need to laugh. Other commentators stated the mayor's point directly: comedy after 9/11 could be useful to audiences, and artists and comedians had a duty to provide it (Kaufman, 2001; Dezell, 2001, p. C1, Boler, 2006).

Nonetheless, *SNL*'s season debut made little attempt to be funny *about* 9/11 (*SNL* Transcripts, 2001). Testifying to their own irrelevance, registering caution and treading carefully, *SNL* and the weekly late-night comedians hewed closely to the patriotic frame of the events-as-tragic, a frame that circulated in official discourse and, for the time, required comic restraint or silence about the attacks. This same pattern of anxiety, silence, and eventual affirmation of comedy could be found in smaller venues, where reactions to attack-related jokes were palpable, and crowds sometimes vocal—groaning and complaining, for example, when a Seattle comedian told a 9/11 joke and was ushered off stage by a club owner who had specifically asked comedians not to talk about the attacks (Rahner, 2001, p. E4). The comedian Gilbert Gottfried, voice of the AFLAC duck, received a cool reception on September 18 when during his act he remarked, “I have to leave for L.A. tonight. I couldn't get a direct flight. They have to make a stop at the Empire State Building.” Gottfried recalled that after he uttered these words “there was just a gasp in the entire room. And one guy yelled out ‘Too Soon’! I thought he meant I didn't take a long enough pause” (Schneider, 2005). He decided the best move was to leave aside 9/11 and do “the most dirty, disgusting material I could think of” (Schneider, 2005). Interestingly, Gottfried's act was part of a Comedy Central roast for Hugh Hefner, who later requested that the joke be removed when the cable network aired the show (Musto, 2001). It was an astonishing time. The White House, corporate sponsors—indeed,

Hugh Hefner, founder of *Playboy*—were setting the parameters for decency and allowable speech (Jones, 2005, p. 87).

The task of saying the right thing—or of not saying the wrong thing—that so intimidated mainstream comedians after 9/11 centers on the notion of decorum, the complex mix of elements that catalyze rhetorical situations, cultural history, and language (Leff, 1987, p. 5). Generally thought of in terms of “correctness” or “appropriateness,” decorum emerged as an issue in discussions about comedy because the attacks were represented in public discourse as a fundamental geopolitical and cultural change.ⁱ The rhetorical techniques, political contingencies, and aesthetic standards that constituted decorum (Hariman, 1992, p. 156) on the post-9/11 U.S. public screen were subject to abrupt revision.ⁱⁱ As one media observer put it, 9/11 “left us with the problem of not only how to entertain people, but what constitutes entertainment in our new world” (Ridley, 2001). In a dominant frame that regarded the attacks as tragic and sacred, the hijackers as the personification of evil, and the U.S. as a community of innocent victims, the range of political humor was considerably narrowed.

Comedy has a special role in helping societies manage crisis moments, and the U.S. media paid considerable attention to the proper role of comedy in public culture after the 9/11 tragedies. While entertainment promoters and artists would eventually recognize the attacks as a kind of calling that could not be ignored, and found a sense of duty in them, the comic subset of the entertainment industry was cautious, chastened by fear of a misspoken word. On October 16, after nearly all major comedy outlets had gone back to work, comedy writers working for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Modern Humorist*, the *New York Observer*, *The Onion*, and *Time* gathered in New York for a public panel which gave a name to the problem: comedy in unfunny times. The rationale for the panel asked: How can we laugh at a time like this? How can we not? It continued:

Arguably, comedy creates community when we need it most; the lens of humor helps

us pin down and examine the vastly incomprehensible. (Also, who couldn't use a little good old-fashioned distraction?) Our panel of accomplished humor writers, editors and performers will explore the role of comedy in times of tragedy. Is irony over? Is silly insensitive? How can one lighten gravity without making light? Join your fellow writers and editors for a serious -- and hilarious -- conversation about the future of funny ("No Laughing Matter").

The "future of funny" was rhetorically problematic not just for the television comedians, but also to those formulating public responses to the attacks in across a variety of media, whether online, in newspapers or news magazines, in film, music, or standup. Starting with these obstacles in mind, this essay analyzes early comic responses to 9/11, and particularly those of the print and online news parody, *The Onion* (onion.com) as an example of how parodic news discourse could surmount the rhetorical chill that fell over U.S. public culture after the tragedies. Because terrorism relies on news spectacles for its impact, hijackings of airplanes were guaranteed to become hijackings of the news cycle (Eisendorf, July 19, 2004). In this context, I argue, the discourse of the news parody was particularly consequential for its capacity to expose and examine the news and address taboo questions about who the terrorists were and what motivated them. By exposing the news as "mere" production and by setting an agenda for learning about Islamic culture and Middle East politics, *The Onion* avoided problems some comics were having and invited U.S. citizens to participate in making new meanings in a confounding news context. This kind of meta-discourse was crucial after 9/11, when shifting rules for decorum created controversy and as official voices in government and media honed frames and narratives for talking about the attacks.

By taking on the news media for the tone and topical choices in covering 9/11, *The Onion* re-framed 9/11 in comic, carnivalesque terms. In the next section, the paper discusses how comic rhetoric, and particularly news parody, interpellates citizenship and the citizen's relationship to power. This section lays out a critical means for understanding *The Onion* as a carnivalesque discourse that couches its criticisms in the format of the news. Next, the paper examines how

official frames and news frames made it difficult for critics and comics to navigate political and media culture as decorum shifted. The final sections shows how *The Onion's* post-9/11 issue sought to inform and educate its U.S. citizens in light of new social issues and language restrictions, cultivating a sense of mastery over the news among readers.

Regeneration and renewal in carnival culture: *Tu stultus es*

And it is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe.
---Flannery O'Connor

The work of political journalism is often under-theorized as a rational process whereby journalists provide information and the burden of citizens is to consume it without prejudice. The assumption here is that we become citizens in a rational process of news consumption, in contrast to views that fear news is too driven by entertainment values and therefore distracts us from responsible citizenship. This binary between news as information and entertainment unnecessarily prohibits appreciation of the narrative and mythological qualities of news (Bird and Dardenne, 1997, p. 335). The problem with conceiving news as information is that news about politics is political precisely because the meanings and values assigned to social problems, political figures, enemies are never resolved (Edelman, 1988, p. 1-9; Schudson, 1997). Alternatively, this essay moves beyond the binaries of “hard news” and “soft news,” or of “information” and “entertainment” and proceeds under the assumption that journalism “makes” the news, that it is a rhetoric written to serve particular social and psychological needs (Schudson, 1997 pp. 16-20). In this view, the news is a process that continually makes and remakes social problems, crises, enemies and leaders. The news thus operates like as a mythological discourse of values: “News offers more than fact—it offers reassurance and familiarity in shared community experiences” and “provides credible answers to baffling questions and ready explanations of complex phenomena” (Bird and Dardenne, 1997, p. 336; see also Edelman, 1988).

The imitators of the major news media—the parodies and parodists—are becoming more powerful in the process of defining and constructing U.S. political culture. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and the *Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live's* “Weekend Update” focus intensely on campaigns, elected officials, and political news. The strength and visibility of these successful cable television shows is showing up in surveys about U. S. American attitudes toward politics.

According to a recent Pew Research poll, young audiences are more likely than their parents to embrace comedy formats with a news focus, and have increasingly turned to news parodies as primary sources for political campaign news (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004; see also Sella, 2000). While mainstream journalism perennially bemoans a decline of younger audience members and seems caught in a “narrative of decline,” (Baym, 2005, p. 260) news parodies have gained viewers and are winning prestigious Peabody Awards and Emmys. While this development is cause for consternation and dismissal for some traditionalists (Hart & Hartelius, 2007), recent analyses of *The Daily Show* argue convincingly that marginalizing news parody ignores the unique contributions the genre makes to journalism and elides its traditional commitment to deliberative democracy (Baym, 2005; McKain, 2005).

The place of the online and print news parody in the so-called “decline” of journalism is not as clear, and, therefore, analysis of the well-known print and online parody, *The Onion*, is overdue. *The Onion* began as a news and entertainment journal in 1988 in Madison, Wisconsin (Wenner, 2002). In 1996, the paper shifted its focus to parody, began to publish a weekly online companion (onion.com), widened distribution of the hard copy of its paper, and, in the ensuing half-decade established itself as a commercial and critical success (Flanigan, 2001, p. 1E; Keighley, 2002). *The Onion* reached about 100,000 readers when it was in print form alone; since 2001 the website and print version of the paper has grown its readership from 2 million per week to over 3 million per week (“Media Kit,” 2007). The day it published its first issue after the terror attacks its website

received more than double the usual number of hits (Worthington, 2001; Schwartz, 2001).ⁱⁱⁱ

Onion.com wins “Webby” awards each year, and in 1999, the book *Our Dumb Century* won The Thurber Prize for humor. Given the complete omnipresence of 9/11 news coverage, it is likely that anyone who picked up the issue would have been familiar with the subject matter of the first post-9/11 issues of *The Onion*. The paper’s first and second issues after the attacks were dedicated almost entirely to 9/11, and their parodies drew extensive attention to the elements of news production of the tragedies—the news conventions, forms, and news actors of the mainstream. Though *The Onion* at times celebrates the vision of the virtuous citizen as an impartial consumer of (preferably print) news, it is also consistently critical of the capacity or usefulness of news in making sense of a sometimes senseless world.

The culture of comedy and particularly of parody in which *The Onion* participates has a long and broad tradition rooted in what Mikhail Bakhtin called “carnival.” Bakhtin continues to influence strongly critical scholarship in the fields of rhetoric and media studies, comic and otherwise. Building from its earliest explication in literary criticism, Bakhtin’s major works, including *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984a) and *Rabelais and His World* (1984b), afford critics theoretical concepts that are employed to study a range of textual practices, including *The Federalist Papers* (Jasinski, 1997), Supreme Court decisions (Conway, 2003), speeches of Bill Clinton and Martin Luther King (Murphy, 1997), protests against Communism and globalization (Bruner, 2005), the campaign rhetoric of Jesse “The Body” Ventura (Janack, 2006), films that range from Orson Welles’ *Mr. Arkadin* (Simon, 1990) to *The Big Lebowski* (Martin and Renegar, 2007), and the most successful animated show in the history of television, *The Simpsons* (Gray, 2006). This list is far from exhaustive. It illustrates, however, as John M. Murphy (2001, p. 260) has argued, how Bakhtin helps critics

to grapple with a social world that seemingly lacks a firm foundation and an accepted metanarrative in which everyone has an allotted place. Bakhtin's conceptual schemes, emphasizing the multiple languages and voices that circulate through the social world as well as the dialogic nature of the simple utterance, fill the need.

Bakhtin's emphasis on the dialogic nature of "carnival," is addressed in several works. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984b) Bakhtin shows how medieval carnival culture critiqued institutional power by constituting what he called "the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (p. 8). This focus on carnival as a second social world points to a communicative interdependence between the people and the privileged (a first world), the low and the high, though the laughter in carnival may just as often come at the expense of weaker groups as it does the privileged (Stallybrass and White, p. 19, Speier, 1998, p. 1353). Studying carnival means understanding double-voiced discourse, or that which "arises under conditions of dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 185). In his treatment of carnival culture, Bakhtin argues that it is marked by the suspension of "hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life," that is, it reverses power relationships and permits the free affiliation of diverse kinds of people (1984b, p. 15). One way the "first world" is suspended in the "second world" of carnival, for example, is by setting aside the usual etiquette surrounding discussions of sex and defecation. In carnival culture, bodies and their orifices are emphasized and amplified through the employment of grotesque imagery and language. The central principle of grotesque imagery is degradation, "that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (1984b, p. 19-20). By degrading a privileged subject, grotesque realism brings it "down to earth," turning the subject into flesh (1984b, p. 20), and uniting all people, no matter their power and privilege, as bodies with inescapable human functions. The purpose of this materialization of the body, this emphasis on the shared, everyday physiology of human experience, is

to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth (p. 21).

In addition to materializing bodies carnival language practices regenerate and reproduce new ways of thinking by mocking the language conventions of the first world. Grotesque realism is, then, also a metaphorical amplification of all carnival themes. A repeated return to representations of the body in Rabelais' work and to bodily themes such as death, sex, defecation, food, and drinking, work "to 'embody' the world, to materialize it, to tie everything in to spatial and temporal series, to measure everything on the scale of the human body, to construct—on that space where the destroyed picture of the world had been—a new picture" (1981, p. 177, 193). Blasphemy and parody thrive in carnival's atmosphere, in irreverent and profane language, which Bakhtin refers to as billingsgate. More than a singular strategy, carnival is a prevailing mood or spirit of fun mixed with social criticism, and its self-reflexive, playful discourse practices mark the enduring value of humor and laughter in the public arena. On the masthead of *The Onion* for example, appears the Latin phrase, *tu stultus es*—you are a fool. This assumption of every person's foolishness becomes an important way to think about the paper's purpose and the carnivalesque mood it activates. In this turning inward and downward on the news, the meanings of the terrorists, the news personalities, and the elected officials are all put into question. A carnival, comic rhetorical posture submits that situations are up for grabs, which means they can be remedied or fixed, and that we can learn from the mistakes of those around us: in Bakhtin's terms, the world is unfinalizable.^{iv} In and out of carnival season, carnival is a reminder of "the droll aspects" and the "gay relativity" of the entire world (1984b, p. 11). Bakhtin's examples of medieval carnival illustrate its range and variety of expressive forms, which spanned from comic rites and cults, to clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, to the literature of parody—all of which "belong to one culture of folk carnival

humor” (p. 4). He argues that carnival culture in the Middle Ages manifests in three forms: first, “ritual spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace;” second, “comic verbal compositions: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular,” and, third, “various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons” (1984b, p. 5). The latter two of these forms are most important in the rhetoric of *The Onion*.

Parody is a central feature in the carnival’s oppositional culture. Indeed, Bakhtin argued that in “carnivalized genres” parody is “organically inherent ... inseparably linked to a carnival sense of the world.” (1984a, p. 127). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “parody” comes from the literary tradition and refers to “a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect” (dictionary.oed.com). It is a word formed by combining the prefix “para,” for “beside,” and “ode,” which refers to the singing of a lyric poem. Parody can thus be thought of as “beside the song” or “beside the singing.” The preposition “beside” is an important indicator that a parodic text is really “texts”—an original and an imitation juxtaposed in a carnivalesque dialogue. Parody thus functions in “a twofold direction—it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (1984a, p. 185). For Bakhtin, “parodying is the creation of a decrowning double; it is that same ‘world turned inside out’” (1984a, p. 127). This interdependence with “first world” texts has often led to a diminution of parody when compared to other forms of critical discourse. From its earliest inceptions definitions of parody directly associated it with disrespect, ridicule, lack of originality, discontinuity, distortion, and nihilism (Rose, 1993, p. 280-283). Linda Hutcheon notes that parody has been called “parasitic and derivative” and for this reason “is in need of defenders” (2000, p. 3).

One reason for skepticism is that the copying or doubling of official discourse through parody in carnival can undermine or reinforce the first world of texts it takes up. Umberto Eco (1984), for example, argues that carnival cannot be truly revolutionary, because repressive cultures employ clowns and circuses while maintaining strict social control (p. 3, 6). But when Eco expects of carnival “actual liberation,” he may stretch the term too far and, paradoxically, rely on an overly narrow definition of the term. Eco seems to assume that ordinary people *become* their masters in carnival, but in Bakhtin’s conceptualization, the people exercise symbolic control over their kings with the recognition that what they are doing is play. Actual medieval carnivals were set-aside times, holidays that would come to an end. As Gray (2006) notes, critics of carnival say it is not politically potent for precisely this reason, that because what we learn in carnival is not transported back outside of it, it can serve the purposes of the powerful—people go have their fun, reverse the hierarchies and mock power, and then go back to an unreflective daily life. Gray writes: “carnivals end, comedy shows end, and, according to comedy’s critics, so does the potential for transgression” (p. 108). But if the carnival is dialogic, it refers also to an entire textual mode of life that is counterposed to official discourses and does not necessarily seek to replace them (Martin and Renegar, p. 300). As Stallybrass and White point out, (1986, p. 15) carnival refers not just to the feasts and celebrations that countered strict religious traditions but also to “a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses” whose power may lie more in their potential (Gray, 2006, p. 108). Likewise, Gardiner’s (1999) notion of carnival as a “critical utopia,” argues that it is a place and mood with a purpose that is neither nihilistic nor idealistic, a discursive mode that upends conventions toward the *telos* of a better world. Carnivals, in Gardiner’s view, act as “manifestations of pervasive social and ideological conflicts with respect to the desired trajectory of social change” (p. 254).

Much of *The Onion*'s criticism is directed at the ability of the news media to inform citizens and improve democratic practice through discourse, but its rhetorical architecture shares many qualities of the real news media. For example, *The Onion* adheres to the Associated Press (AP) style guide to make its imitation recognizable, familiar, and effective; paradoxically, the use of AP style to speak nonsense and the regular appearance of profanity destabilizes the authority of the style guide by making it look rigid and mechanical. Additionally, mimicry of the AP style and numerous other news and language conventions is a way for the paper to borrow the authority of news tradition, which works to reinforce the news tradition. The news parody's re-circulation of many of the stories, themes, and characters found in mainstream media also reinforces conventional ideas about what is important and newsworthy. As a critique, however, there exists a capacity to expose the naturalness of news representation, and to collapse news categories and reduce the news to a predictable, mechanical process. Parodies of the news make it look rote and mechanical, and, in so doing, can close the distance between audiences and news orthodoxies by making the news look foolish. As a critical practice, parody and the related strategies of irony, burlesque, satire, and pastiche thus can act as correctives or supplements to ongoing debates about their subjects or targets in public culture, destabilizing them but also building anew from them (Dentith, 2000, p. 192-193).

The point here is that we need succumb neither to a blind enthusiasm regarding the revolutionary power of carnival nor to Eco's either/or binary that presumes a parodic, carnivalesque transgression leads to either real/true/actual liberation or it is illusory/false/fake. For Bakhtin, the effect of the carnival is an act of renewal and a regeneration of hope and new possibilities among a people. Carnival "revives and renews at the same time," (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 11) and Bakhtin frequently emphasizes the point that carnival is ambivalent, not a bare negation of high culture that says "no," but an ambiguous response to a culture that may have become ossified, too monologic (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 4; Stam, 1989, p. 173). For example, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* the

author employs a mirror metaphor to describe parody: “In carnival, parodying was employed very widely, in diverse forms and degrees: various images (for example, carnival pairs of various sorts) parodied one another variously and from various points of view; it was like an entire system of crooked mirrors, elongating, diminishing, distorting in various directions and to various degrees” (p. 127). The parody, in other words, does not merely reflect back an opposite or reverse the truth or essence of an original. Its reworking of other discourses is a varied, creative process specific to individual instances, more rhizome than tree. In this light, Simon (1990) builds on Bakhtin’s notion of parody as regenerative, characterizing it as “the key to the development of new styles, genres, and so forth, because it criticized conventionalized styles and genres by exposing them as one-sided, bounded, or limited in their capacity to represent reality” (p. 23). For Hutcheon (2000), however, parody does not necessarily indicate the *inadequacy* of an imitated discourse so much as an artist’s desire to reform discourses to fit different needs (p. 4). This is not to argue that parody in the carnival mode is an ideal means of social change. Carnival cultural practices may emerge because meaningful dialogic interaction between the symbolic kings and their publics is stifled. Carnival is, nevertheless, an important textual mode ordinary citizens use to confront and critique power, a way to get through to power by destroying it with laughter.

In democracies the news media is assumed to assist in the process of making sense of and confronting power, though it has not always been so in the U.S. The founders had reservations about a free press that informed citizens but gradually the figure of an omniscient citizen news consumer gained significant rhetorical force (Schudson, 1999, Gans, 2003, p. 2). The literate, participating citizen imagined by 19th century reformers put education at the center of performing citizenship and made it incumbent upon cultural institutions, including the news media, to deliver that education. As Schudson (1999) argues, “the product of this education is our citizenship, the political expectations and aspirations people inherit and internalize” (Schudson, 1999 p. 5- 6).

Because of this lofty ambition, its commitment to a discourse of Truth, and its centrality to notions of proper citizenship, “the news aims for coronation” and is thus “is in dire need of fools” (Gray, 2006, pp. 97-98). Gray’s analysis of news parody shows that rather than degrading the news, the genre can nurture the public sphere by offering “moments of recognition” that are the beginnings of a will to oppose dominant or preferred meanings (p. 94-95). News parody is a way for citizens to

construct and define their relationship with the news itself, not only so that we can forge a relationship with the public sphere through this, but also so that we can be better equipped to read through and filter through, political information as it is presented to us (p. 104).

News parodies around 9/11, when they did emerge, framed it by emphasizing human errors and human stupidity, whether that meant admonishing politicians, journalists and journalism, the attackers, and even readers. *The Onion*’s parodic rhetoric is a critique of the perceived monologism of the news and its ostensible grasp on Truth that can help audiences think through the news as discourse by challenging its ability to live up to its ambitions.

Framing post-9/11 news

As the war on terror was announced and the White House solidified its rhetorical strategies for framing that war, President George W. Bush on numerous occasions referred to the 9/11 airline hijackers as “cowards.” Soon thereafter on ABC’s *Politically Incorrect*, guest Dinesh D’Souza refuted the president’s choice of terms: “Look what they did ... you have a whole bunch of guys who are willing to give their life ... These are warriors.” In his response to those comments, the host of the show, Bill Maher, famously added: “We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building—say what you want about it, it’s not cowardly” (Armstrong, 2001, emphasis is mine). Many considered calling U.S. soldiers cowards and agreeing with D’Souza that the jihadists were warriors untimely, at best, but to the White House and to many commercial sponsors, it was a completely improper and

even dangerous way to talk about an enemy. Maher's comments were so upsetting that several advertisers pulled sponsorships of *Politically Incorrect*, and the controversy was widely credited with ABC's decision to drop the show several months later (Armstrong, 2001). When asked about Maher's comments days later, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer delivered a lesson: the condemnations were "reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do. This is not a time for remarks like that; there never is [a time]" (Press Briefing, September 26, 2001, whitehouse.gov). The swift, powerful, negative reaction to Maher demonstrated the power of the news media and government's framing of post-attack public discourse.

A rhetorical "frame" is comprised of the words and images government officials, surrogates, and journalists use "to exercise political influence over each other and over the public" (Entman, 2003, p. 417). Studies of presidential rhetoric indicate that the Bush administration had a strong impact in crystallizing terminologies and frames for talking about 9/11. Denise Bostdorff (2003) and John M. Murphy (2003) have argued that the speeches of George W. Bush defined the post-9/11 rhetorical situation within parameters of epideictic rhetoric, rather than deliberative rhetoric. That is, the role and function of the audience was not, in the Aristotelian equation, as much a matter of *judging* policies (deliberative), but of *observing a spectacle* in which the president praised those who agreed with his policy choices and blamed those who did not (epideictic). As Murphy concluded, the President's epideictic rhetoric successfully crafted the authority for him to "dominate public interpretation of the events of September 11" (2003, p. 608). Bush's interpretation of the attacks was derived out of the tradition of cold-war rhetoric, as the terrorists, then Osama bin Laden, and later Saddam Hussein, were portrayed as vicious animal others. Critical to this move was a shift to a framework of war metaphors instead of a framework of crime metaphors to describe the attacks, a choice President Bush has had to continually defend.^v With a crime frame discarded

Bush's subsequent speeches developed as ceremonial rehearsal of contemporary war rhetoric topoi featuring the savage "othering" of enemies (Ivie, 1980; Stuckey, 1992; Butler, 2002; Stables, 2003). The Manichaeian constructions of the U.S. as a good antidote to the evil hijackers and al Qaeda operatives are crucial in Bush's war rhetoric (Murphy, 2003, 614). Though Maher and D'Souza's comments showed that comics could be dangerous to authority, the sustained negative reaction to them drew significant attention and was thus an opportunity to publicize and strengthen the war frame favored by officials and journalists.^{vi}

According to Entman (2003), specific frames are more likely to influence audiences if they use culturally resonant terms and if those terms are prominent and repeated (p. 417). He argues that the president's frames dominated the news, and that the terms "war on terror" and "evil," made difficult the task of characterizing the U.S. and the perpetrators of the attacks in any way that contradicted the White House (Entman, 2003, p. 416). The president's ability to dominate interpretations of 9/11 was (at least momentarily) achieved by asserting and defending "right discourse" to control discussion and advance the administration's goals. If the hardening of the administration's position in speeches and press briefings was effective at containing alternative frames post-9/11, the massive resources of time and money poured into 9/11 news coverage and the centrality of the Bush administration in it made the White House an easy and readily available target for news parodists.

Comedy in Unfunny Times

Onion Editor in Chief Robert Siegel was mindful of the significant obstacles he and his writers faced. "At first we were at a bit of a loss," Siegel remarked. They finally decided that not responding directly to the attacks "would have looked painfully irrelevant—it would make us ask why do we even exist, if we would resist weighing in on the biggest news story since Pearl Harbor?" (Schwartz, 2001). Siegel's reference to Pearl Harbor as a news story carries with it both

indignation and an assumption that the attacks were an opportunity for *The Onion* to weigh in on national issues. Invoking both the significance of an attack on the United States and outrage toward it, Siegel's analogy of his work to real journalism posits that 9/11 fits the accepted historical definition of a big story. The issue followed his lead: centered on the front page a graphic logo mimicked the "standing head" indicative of a special news issue, featuring a map of the continental United States in a crosshairs. The caption beneath the graphic reads: "Holy Fucking Shit: Attack On America." (Figure 1) (Hereafter, I refer to the issue as *The HFS Onion*). The standing head sets the outraged tone and introduces a mockery of news media sensationalism that marks the issue. The HFS issue developed this outrage and derision in several short story parodies, paragraph-long teasers, a headlines-only section, charts and graphs "measuring" public opinion, a point-counterpoint parody of the op-ed page, and a mock-TV guide. As it introduced its stories and story teasers, *The Onion* redeployed and repurposed images, news themes, and characters from September 11 news, much to the delight of its fans (Benner, 2001).

Real journalists, who are among the paper's biggest fans, said publicly that *The Onion* had done "a phenomenal job" (Hemmer, 2001). One online media critic called the issue "the most emotionally and psychically on-point coverage of the events of any national publication" (Jarnow, 2002). Published reviews of the issue and blog commentary affirmed the basic value of the issue to readers. User "Roup" on a blog titled *The Brunching Shuttlecocks* registered a typical fan's thanks:

It would have been easy to be flippant, or to ignore the issue entirely. Either would have been a mistake. By taking a humorous look at events of such magnitude, I feel a real service is performed; where we can come together and "deal with it" through the common bond of a chuckle or titter (2001).

Another blog added a link to the paper and offered more praise: "...if you need a good laugh, and have been a little depressed about this whole terrorist thing, go to *The Onion* and click on the "HOLY FUCKING SHIT: Attack on America" icon. If you are offended by such humor, just

give it a chance” (Addendum blog, 2001). Many others wrote *The Onion* to say that the issue was the first thing they had laughed at since the attacks, and the paper reported receiving exponentially more e-mail about the issue than it had about other issues, almost all of which was positive (Wenner, 2002; Sullivan, 2001). This and other praise of the *HFS* issue was often based on the satisfaction readers found in the issue’s challenge to emerging frames for understanding that were advanced in the mainstream media and by political leadership. Fans praise the *Onion* for its apparent authenticity in speaking about the media and about politicians, and it is in this way the paper inculcated a carnivalesque spirit of opposition and fun in its fans. As one fan puts it: “you probably already know that where most newspapers are roughly 90% fact and 10% truth, *The Onion* (www.theonion.com) is about 10% fact and 90% truth” (Jarnow, 2002). Writing in 2003, syndicated columnist and economist Paul Krugman echoed this trope, remarking that *The Onion*’s mocking motto, “America’s Finest News Source” “has been the literal truth” for the last couple of years (p. 53).

The faith expressed by *Onion* fans demonstrates the news parody’s potential to create for readers what Gardiner (1999) called a critical utopia. Rather than offer empirical evidence about audience reception, however, I employ a critical-rhetorical perspective to show how this news parody created a “second world” for contemplating and reconsidering the attacks and explain why it would become rhetorically compelling. Although *The Onion* shares with real journalism the goal of producing informed and engaged cultural citizens, it frames 9/11 and most of its stories as stories *about the news*, which lies in stark contrast to the seeming disappearance of the news in its usual rhetorical formulation. Because it is “built” on the first world of official discourses in this basic sense, news parody is critically distanced from and complementary to that world. As a coherent rhetorical frame began to materialize and dominate after 9/11, then, its consequences became clearer, which motivated multiple second-world attempts to make them more manageable in

language (Burke, 1937, p. 174-175). After considering how *The Onion* engages in a critique of news forms, genres, and conventions, the next section examines how the paper addressed social issues being raised in official discourse. For example, what failures, political, media, and otherwise, contributed to the attacks? What could the U.S. have done to prevent acts of terrorism? What motivated them? What is the nature of the grievances between the U.S. and the hijackers that were surfacing as reasons behind the attacks?

Like other Internet news websites, the visual aesthetic of *The Onion* shows the influence of TV news values in online environments that result from overlapping styles, content, and business models (Eggerton, 2005, p. 1). Its visual setup online is achieved with fairly simple web design software and the result is the look and feel of serious newspaper that has been adapted to the web. In online journalistic terms the HFS issue was minimalist, favoring text and news photography and eschewing audio and video altogether. The arrangement of headline, pictures, and stories is more or less consistent with online political opinion journals and online papers like the *USA Today* or *Variety*. Taking not a specific newspaper as its subject, but the generic layout of all online newspapers, *The Onion* parodies the formal aspects of news language and news stories and the topical choices of mainstream media. The HFS issue, for instance, included a mock TV schedule that spoofed the programming of major networks and cable outlets such as BET, MTV, Lifetime, History, Nickelodeon, Animal Planet, and Public Access. ABC's mock programming highlights the fear appeals in "breaking news" TV banners: "Attack on America," "America Attacked," "America in Crisis" and "America Still in Crisis." CBS programming, according to *The Onion*, would include "Dan Rather's 83rd straight hour on the air," "Dan Rather seriously loses his shit," and "Medicating Dan Rather." As a news convention, Rather's presence on television signifies the importance of a story, and in this way big story news becomes synonymous with his appearance on screen. The idea is that we will manage as long as Rather is there, slowly and thoughtfully sifting through footage

and reports handed to him, a notion Rather and CBS bought into when he stayed on the air for several days after the attacks. *The Onion* mocks Rather by refiguring his heroism downward, to his physical essences—to his existence as a human being with bodily limits. It draws him, and the importance of his appearance in this crisis moment, down to size, serving as a reminder that a hardworking star reporter can only take us so far in helping us understand and learn from the attacks.

By foregrounding 9/11 as a news event, the HFS issue provided a second-world, carnivalesque perspective that challenged the authority of the mainstream news to define the event and articulated new ways for citizens to conceptualize its meaning. Watching news coverage of 9/11 presented audiences with a contradictory set of expectations: heartbreaking stories compelled caring and attention, but they also underscored the great distance between viewing and experiencing the attacks. And news was everywhere: major TV networks canceled their late night comedians and preempted lucrative sitcoms and sports programming to show news about 9/11, and audiences more than doubled in size from the weeks prior to the attacks (Gans, 2003, p. 22). This tension between distance and intimacy is captured on a front-page chart called “STATshot” that mimics those found on the front page of each section in *USA Today*. Appearing September 26, it ranked answers to the question, “How Have We Spent the Past Few Weeks.”

1. Crying
2. Staring at hands
3. Feeling guilty about renting video
4. Calling loved one
5. Thinking about donating blood
6. Watching TV for nine hours, finally getting up, going to corner store for Cheez Doodles, eating Cheez Doodles, realizing Cheez Doodles aren't helping, throwing Cheez Doodles away (p. 1).

The graph depicts a distraught but caring nation trying to balance the horror of the attacks with life as usual. Underscoring the experience of 9/11 as mediation, as a big story, the

emotional calculus here articulates proper emotional responses to 9/11 with the viewing experience as a central feature. For example, STATshot instructs us that watching television, which was dominated by news programming, was appropriate (#6), but watching videos induced feelings of guilt (#3), and the hierarchy between video and television is instructive. What separates watching TV from watching a video is the payoff that TV offers to viewers in a crisis moment: the feeling that in consuming the news they have performed an act of citizenship. The allusion to the shared experience of television that united people after the attacks is, however, an ambivalent one, given cultural associations of television with laziness and sloth. The *HFS Onion* plays with the conflicting ideas about television again in a story featuring a character named Christine Pearson. It is Pearson's struggle with 9/11 news that readers learn about in, "Not knowing what else to do, woman bakes American flag cake." The story moves through the tension between intimacy and distance involved in confronting mediations of 9/11:

Feeling helpless in the wake of the horrible Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that killed thousands, Christine Pearson baked a cake and decorated it like the American flag Monday. 'I had to do something to force myself away from the TV,' said Pearson, 22, carefully laying rows of strawberry slices on the white-fudge-frosting-covered cake. 'All of those people. Those poor people. I don't know what else to do.'

Pearson, who had never before expressed feelings of patriotism in cake form, attributed the baking project to a loss of direction. Having already donated blood, mailed a check to the Red Cross, and sent a letter of thanks to the New York Fire Department, Pearson was aimlessly wandering from room to room in her apartment when the idea of creating the confectionary stars and stripes came to her ... 'It's beautiful,' [her friend] Cassie said. 'The cake is beautiful' (p. 1, 12).

This story registers the sensibilities and problems of viewing the news during national crisis and articulates alternatives for action. Christine Pearson had to force herself away from TV news, coverage many in the U.S. apparently found disturbing but about which many were also morbidly curious and were watching at length. Pearson is pushed to do something more

than “merely” watch television, but watching television coverage of the disasters, paradoxically, left her with an excessive sense of responsibility toward victims. What could she do beyond watching the news? Pearson is offered here as a model for post-9/11 citizens who wanted to do more than witness the attacks on television. Her character in the news parody renegotiates what it means to be a citizen. For some, “doing something” after 9/11 meant nationalistic responses such as affixing an American flag sticker to their car or posting one outside the front of their house, and the President’s own worry about the economic impact of the attacks led him to recommend going shopping. In contrast to the perceived emptiness of these responses, Pearson’s excess—thank-you cards to strangers and the donation of money and blood—seems to match the emotional intensity of the horrible images in a genuine way. The seeming silliness of her latest act, the cake, is drawn out and looks peculiar, though, because Pearson lives in Kansas and “has never visited and knows no one in either New York or Washington, D.C.” (p. 12). Television watching has tied the Midwesterner intimately to the fates of “All of those people, those poor people.” Searching for an appropriate emotional response, Pearson’s dilemma was in reacting to something that was at once directed at Americans and at the same time very distant from them by virtue of their positions as viewers. The seeming futility in her latest response to 9-11—a stars-and-stripes cake—makes the situation manageable by holding up for examination the intimacy she feels with the victims.

The joke about Christine Pearson’s reaction also makes her worthy of sympathy and her example one with which readers might identify: it was a real effort to respond to 9/11 and an ordinary response that is more than watching TV and eating Cheez Doodles but less than enlisting in the armed forces to fight the war on terror. By contrast, 9/11 news narratives offered the stories of many heroes, especially policemen, firemen, and other

rescue workers, but those acts of heroism, like Dan Rather's, were out of reach for most viewers. Wearing an FDNY cap, for example, would be an alternative strategy, but it would fall short of Pearson's numerous, resource-intensive efforts. Identifying with Pearson was accepting one's own feebleness and managing it by recognizing the absurdity in the experience of viewing the attacks and absurdity of human violence generally. Here, prevailing notions of an attack "on America" are brought to the foreground and the geographic distance between the acts (in New York) and their mediations (in Kansas) are made apparent. The *HFS Onion* thus recognizes the "first world" as a produced world, but to be useful to audiences, it would have to do move beyond the observation that news is production. It would have to help us process the news, to make sense of the news and sense of 9/11 as a real, new moment in history that affected audiences as citizens of the United States.

More than mediation: Grotesque realism and the bodies of the condemned

Images and graphics that appeared online, on television, and in newspapers were central to articulating alternative frames and narratives after 9/11 (Zelizer, 2002, p. 50), and were especially important given *The Onion's* carnivalesque critique of mediation and the mainstream news media. Barbie Zelizer argues that the centrality of images to 9/11 vocabularies encompasses two distinct senses of their special importance: crash images were the tools of terrorism and terrorists as well as artifacts circulated on public screens in support of policy arguments in the U.S. and elsewhere. Moreover, for all but a small percentage of people who were near the WTC or the Pentagon, or who were directly impacted because loved ones were injured or killed in the attacks, "9/11" is apprehended as a set of mediations that were consumed during and after the attacks. In this sense, the 9/11 attacks were a "theatrical spectacle," and coverage reinforced those elements of the attack

carried out “for the spectacular effect of it” (Zizek, 2003). Stock images from the attacks—of the towers, of memorials, of people running from the destruction—were played and replayed for a wide range of rhetorical purposes, including their use to mobilize public opinion for military action (Zelizer, 2002, p. 48, 65-66).

Yet images of the towers were more than a spectacle and thus a source of considerable anxiety and curiosity. This was due, in part, to their eerie familiarity. The centrality of images and the ambivalent responses those images would produce becomes more evident on the front page of *The Onion*, where images of the WTC towers were given new life and levity. There, in the upper-right hand of the screen page, the paper redeployed a ubiquitous photo of burning WTC towers beneath the headline: “American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie” [Figure 2]. The image captures the horrifying moment as the second building is hit; the first tower is emitting dense smoke and the tops of both towers are shrouded in a black-orange fire burst. Shot with the Brooklyn Bridge in the foreground, the photo is dramatic, efficient, and emotional. Though the towers dominate the image, a U.S. flag flying atop the bridge balances the horror of the attacks with a ready-made nationalistic response, turning the terror of the crash scene into a patriotic rallying around the military response as symbolized by the flag. The caption beneath the image, “An actual scene from real life,” opens up a space between real images and fake ones, real tragic moments and fiction, real crashes, not movies. The allusion to Bruckheimer, a prolific producer of hyperbolic action dramas in film and television, posits a literal analogy between viewing this image and viewing action movies, framing for its viewer the experience of 9/11 as a mediated and re-mediated production. Bruckheimer’s work on military themes in *Top Gun*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Armageddon*, *Soldier of Fortune, Inc.*, *Con-Air*, *Enemy of the State*, *The Rock*, and *Pearl Harbor*, led to criticism that he had become “the Pentagon’s darling” by putting a pleasant gloss on war (“That’s militainment,” 2002, p. 1). Thus, invoking Bruckheimer also implicates the reader for having

enjoyed and contributed to the playing out of scenarios that suddenly now had real consequences.

Hard as it was to grasp, this was more than just mediation. As the accompanying article put it,

For nearly two full weeks, Americans sat transfixed in front of their televisions, listening to shocked newscasters struggle to maintain their composure while describing events that would have been rejected by Hollywood producers as not believable enough for a Sylvester Stallone vehicle.

In a mock interview for the story, Bradley Martin added, “This isn’t supposed to happen in real life. This is supposed to be something that happens in the heads of guys in L.A. sitting around a table, trying to figure out where to add a love interest.”^{viii} It is in this counter-framing, of subverting the common use of the WTC towers image in news footage, that the *HFS Onion* exercises a regenerative function, demonstrating for readers an alternative frame of interpretation that evoked an entirely different set of coded meanings (Hollywood, leisure, excitement) than the ones offered by the mainstream news (grief, war, American pride). Here, the captions spur critical reflection on the event and the context of popular culture in which the images were often understood, while encouraging audiences to remember that the image was real—real people, real death. By interspersing real and faked news photos, fake headlines and fake stories, *The Onion* opened up possibilities for interpreting and making meaning from this and other images and personalities featured in 9/11 news stories.

This is not, however, the same as an argument that the news is “mere” or “only” production. It is a counterargument to that notion, which is evident in the emphasis on materiality in the Bruckheimer story, as well in the stark emotional tone of the front page. By inviting audiences to reinterpret the WTC towers image in the context of popular culture, the “HOLY FUCKING SHIT” graphic or “standing head” draws attention on the page and thematically ties together the special issue coverage. In addition, like the practice it parodies, the HFS graphic is visual shorthand that centers the reader’s experience with the issue and communicates the topic and tone of the issue with

great efficiency, much like those of traditional newspapers. It registers surprise at the attacks and critiques self-seriousness and sensationalism in the news media. At the same time, the parody of standing heads is a vehicle for a direct, visceral response to the experience of viewing the attacks that registers outrage at them and at the perpetrators. The prominent placement of the words “fuck” and “shit” in this context enables a carnivalesque critique of the news media that draws attention to the shortcomings of news conventions in responding to human tragedy (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 20). As Robert Scott (1973) has argued, no language choice “better reveals the fundamental corruptness of the dominant social values and the depth of hypocrisy of the system than the use of the word ‘fuck’” (p. 132). This use of what Bakhtin called “billingsgate,” records the outrage and frustration brought on by the attacks by using words that are forbidden in mainstream media and foreign to the genre’s cool emotional detachment and objectivity.

The use of profanity hints at a larger place for grotesque realism in the *HFS Onion’s* response to 9/11, which appears in the issue’s repeated return to violent imagery, especially where the bodies of the terrorists are concerned. While President Bush drew sharp criticism for his characterization of the hijackers as animals who needed to be “smoked out of their holes,” the way to express anger and rage at them without violating decorum was not as clear. While there are ethical limits to rhetoric that turns any humans, even criminals, into animals, contravening cultural pressures for politically correct language made it arguably more difficult to condemn and understand the actions of the extremists who perpetrated the acts of terrorism on 9/11. *The Onion* punishes the hijackers by ridiculing them in the language and imagery of grotesque realism indicative of the carnival. For example, a “Point-Counterpoint” column, which appeared in the paper’s “Opinion” section, addresses how the U.S. ought to respond to the attacks. The joke manifests in the fact that the columnists do not really disagree: one declares, “We must retaliate

with blind rage,” while the other argues, “We must retaliate with measured, focused rage.” In both cases, the terrorists are the subjects of vicious bodily harm:

I say that to bring them before a civilized court is to raise them up to the level of humans. Terrible acts must be punished with terrible retribution. Are we going to humanely execute by lethal injection men who wantonly killed thousands of innocents? Instead, all of those who are guilty must be dipped in boiling fat and fed to dogs (p. 9).

The other columnist’s suggestion for punishment also focused specifically on the degradation of the flesh of terrorists.

They must be tried and convicted in a U.S. court of law, so that President Bush, can, on live TV, pump bullet after bullet into their bodies, starting with their feet and slowly working his way up. Then, after a great deal of soul-searching and consultation with his top advisors, the president must toss their lifeless, bullet-riddled bodies into a shark tank (p. 9).

Unlike the conventional clash of ideals on the op-ed page, the two views here presume that a military response is imminent: “Vigorous debate and discussion must precede any inevitable decision regarding the target locations and the number of weapons.” (p. 9) The grotesque response toward the perpetrators laughs at their deaths and creates images akin to those in the most violent video games, and the language is ramped up to absurd levels across three separate columns in the HFS issue. This hyperviolence works to address the heinousness of homicidal terrorism via what Bakhtin calls carnival’s body “series,” lowering the terrorists in intersecting discourses of defecation and copulation (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 170). In “Hijackers Surprised to Find Selves in Hell,” the hijackers become food, sex toys, and receptacles for feces, illustrating what Bakhtin observed when “the human body series (on its anatomical plane) is crossed” with the “food-and-kitchen series” and the “death series” (1981, p. 173). In the hell scenario, demons subject the hijackers to atrocious, graphic bodily punishment for their crimes. “I do not know what they [the hijackers] were expecting,” reads the front-page story, “but they certainly didn’t seem prepared to

be skewered from eye socket to bunghole and then placed on a spit so that their flesh could be roasted by the searing gale of flatus which issues forth from the haunches of Asmoday.” As their bodies are poked and punctured at the openings and made into food, even the form of fire is a way of demeaning the terrorists: an apparently continuous fart from a demon associated with homosexuality in Catholic and ancient Judaic sacred texts. As the story continues, another demon, “Iblis The Thrice-Damned, the cacodemon charged with conscripting new arrivals into the ranks of the forgotten” is busy “twisting the limbs” of the hijackers “into unspeakably obscene shapes.” (p. 12) Combining the human body series with the sex (copulation) series, punishment of the terrorists in hell would include “being hollowed out and used as prophylactics by thorn-cocked Gulbuth the Rampant” (p. 12) In an interview, Mohammed Atta, one of the hijackers, lamely objects to the grotesque bodily harms to which he is subjected: “I am fed the boiling feces of traitors by malicious, laughing Ifrit. Is this to be my reward for destroying the enemies of my faith?” (p. 1, 12)

The Onion addresses the hijackers in rhetoric unavailable to serious, official voices, which had to tread carefully around already existing tensions about politically correct language. At the same time, the dominant frames are implicit in the act of “doubling” that defines news parody. For example, the paper characterizes the attacks as acts of complete madness motivated by “silly” religious goals--Atta says he was promised that he would “spend eternity in Paradise, being fed honeyed cakes by 67 virgins” and Abdul Aziz Almorari was apparently also told heaven would be his reward (“Hijackers Surprised”). These ideas confuse officials in Hell, who, like the ostensible reader, cannot fathom what possible conviction might motivate “the evil with which they ended their lives and those of so many others.” This framing of the hijackers, which initially dominated official discourse about radical Islam, focused heavily on “crazy” religious zealots and unexplained “evil,” as opposed to the less comfortable and less demanding stories about the political goals and symbolism in the attacks that might emerge under close inspection. The grotesque imagery in *The Onion*, by contrast, challenges the seriousness and piety of political correctness as a way to deal

with Others (especially brown skinned, non-Christian Others) who break the rules. Making common the terrorists by degrading their bodies, *The Onion* punishes them without undue cruelty and without the relying on stereotype. *The Onion's* critique of the news as a mechanical production is not only a negation of the news as production. The “second world” of carnival activates a rhetoric of healing that invited emotional responses and cultural participation that serious discourse often did not or could not provide. This reframing of the attacks problematizes the mediated experience and the citizen's place in it. Having placed the notion of citizenship in question, it cultivated the figure of the virtuous citizen by celebrating news consumption as an act of citizenship.

The un/educated citizen: American values, Middle Eastern politics

Parodic responses to 9-11 in the *HFS Onion* extended to a wide variety of targets—to the media, the government, the hijackers, to U.S. Americans. As such, in navigating decorum *The Onion's* rhetoric entered into and reinforced ongoing discussions about the values of pluralism, the separation church and state, and anti-racism. As Hutcheon (2000) argues, parody,

by its very doubled structure, is very much an inscription of the past in the present, and it is for that reason that it can be said to embody and bring to life actual historical tensions. It is true that, as a way for art to engage history through purely textual appropriation, though, parody is again going to be potentially suspect in some people's eyes; that it is, nonetheless, not ineffectual can be seen in the powerful parodic art created by artists with a variety of interventionist social agendas focussed on issues such as gender, class, sexual choice, race, ethnicity, and so on (p. xii).

In response to violence targeted against Muslims in the U.S. in the days following the attacks, for example, the page 2 story “Arab-American Third-Grader Returns From Recess Crying, Saying He Didn't Kill Anyone,” challenges the presumption of American innocence and unquestioned exceptionalism that pervaded dominant news frames. In it, “Eddie Bahri” tells a presumably white boy, Douglas Allenby, “I did not kill anybody. And my dad didn't either, okay?” (p. 2). The joke's anti-racism is an exposure of white racism and an invitation to learn that affirms pluralism, religious diversity, and tolerance. The indictment of white racism is indirect—it happens on a playground,

not in an adult space like the office, and so the racism and its redress are easier to swallow because they belong to someone else. Other stories picked up on the perceived sense of U.S. American ignorance regarding the motives and history of Islamic radicals and sought to fill in perceived gaps in audience knowledge more specifically about Islam. For example, the third-page story “God Angrily Clarifies Don’t Kill Rule,” begins as God calls a press conference. In that press conference, the voice of God is used to deliver a history lesson that begins,

Responding to recent events on Earth, God, the omniscient creator-deity worshipped by billions of followers of various faiths for more than 6,000 years, angrily clarified His longtime stance against humans killing each other on Monday ... “I tried to put it in the simplest possible terms for you people, so you'd get it straight, because I thought it was pretty important,” said God, called Yahweh and Allah respectively in the Judaic and Muslim traditions (p. 3).

The use of the generic “creator-deity” and the shared vision of a God from “various faiths” casts for a broad net of believers, but the story, like the anti-racist message delivered by Eddie Bahri, targets white Christian U.S. Americans. God is a stern father who lectures about the common ground shared by large religious faiths and admonishes readers for their ignorance of faith practices other than their own (presumably Christian practices). Working from the premise of a shared God, the story compares Christianity with “Judaic and Muslim traditions” and asserts that condemning the violent acts of the terrorists is to condemn also violent acts of revenge. The article develops explanations of *jihad*: “This whole medieval concept of the *jihad*, or holy war, had all but vanished from the Muslim world in, like, the 10th century, and with good reason,” God said. “There's no such thing as a holy war, only unholy ones” (p. 3). God asserts hypocrisy in the idea that *jihad* is an act of religious faith, and preemptively denies any religious justifications of violence. The hijackers are again the targets of the joke, this time for their confused and extreme interpretations of religious texts that led them to their demise. But here, the U.S. was also blamed and assigned an active role in the story of 9/11, and audiences are lectured about the wisdom of militarism. Continuing the short-

course on Islamic history and culture, a short story on the second page reminded readers that the U.S. had supported bin Laden when Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union. “Bush Sr. Apologizes to Son for Funding Bin Laden In ‘80s” purports to overhear George H. W. Bush telling President George W. Bush:

I’m sorry, son. We thought it was a good idea at the time because he was part of a group fighting communism in Central Asia. We called them ‘freedom fighters’ back then. I know it sounds weird. You sort of had to be there.

The mainstream news would not and could not make this kind of back-story—the U.S. *did* fund bin Laden—part of the frame (Entman, 2003, p. 416). In an economical fake news headline, however, the complex relationship between the U.S., and bin Laden, and the attacks is crystallized and the notion of U.S. innocence upended. Lest they become too preachy or condescending on this point, these stories balance their pedantic tone with a good dose of silliness—the Bush/bin Laden story, for example, sits between media and popular culture jokes: “President Urges Calm, Restraint Among Nation’s Ballad Singers” and “Dinty Moore Breaks Long Silence On Terrorism With Full-Page Ad.” This organization of stories blunts the overall ideological position of the paper and allows it to call attention to motives for the attack that had been regarded as taboo. Beyond negating the terrorists, drawing attention to prior U.S. involvement with bin Laden reframes the attacks as opportunities for learning, and the accompanying spirit meant continual questioning of conventional wisdom and of the Bush administration. Opening up, rather than closing down public discourse, the stories articulated America’s blind spots and held them up for examination. If the paper entertained the taboo possibility that the United States had motivated the terrorists, it also suggested ways to move on from that recognition.

Indeed, the issue features a series of lectures about Islamic traditions, Middle East politics, and right behavior that set an agenda for moving beyond the attacks. A bulleted short article in a back section called “Parent Corner” is a remarkably succinct and digestible recent history of the

relationship between Afghanistan, the United States, and Iraq. Titled “Talking to your child about the WTC attack,” the article begins “The events of Sept. 11 are extremely difficult for a child to understand. What should you tell your child when he or she asks why this happened? Obviously, there’s no easy answer...” It goes on to historicize the religious and geopolitical conditions surrounding 9/11, explaining, in six bullet points, several factors that influenced the attacks. For example:

As your child may or may not know, much of modern Islamic fundamentalism has its roots in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, whose two-year sojourn to the U.S. in the late 1940s convinced him that Western society and non-Islamic ideologies were flawed and corrupt. Over the course of the next several decades, his writings became increasingly popular throughout the Arab world, including Afghanistan.

Here, the paper addressed directly a haunting but dangerous question many journalists had also been asking: why did they do this and why had the U.S. been unable to anticipate or prevent the terror tragedies? Answers here point to an education gap—a lack of Arab speakers, a lack of an appreciation or understanding of Islam among majority U.S. Americans, and a lack of knowledge about ongoing tensions between Arab nation states and the U.S. Given this presumption of an education gap, the story assumes a naïve audience of beginners. The sincere tone and lecture format in “Talking to your child” re-frames the attacks as part of a larger story that—like the brief Bush/bin Laden story—situates the U.S. as a causal agent in the context of the attacks:

Explain to him or her that much of [bin Laden’s] anger is rooted in the fact that, during the Gulf War, the U.S. stationed troops in Saudi Arabia, the nation that is home to the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Bin Laden was further angered by America’s post-Gulf War efforts to oust Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein by imposing an embargo against his nation.

The decisiveness and conviction of the language and teacherly tone in “Talking to your Child” underscores the power of traditional news reporting to set agenda for learning. The presumption of the stories about Islamic cultures and Middle Eastern politics is that the U.S. was a culpable

agent in the attacks, and that knowledge about the Middle East is an obligatory act and a more serious responsibility after 9/11. It is a way out of the dominant frames, and it is offered as a way forward.

In short, the HFS issue practices journalism, and thus highlights the educational potentials of news parody. This is not to argue that we ought to necessarily valorize parodic styles or the values of *The Onion*, nor is it an argument that parody replaces journalism. More interesting is the way virtue is linked to news consumption in this carnivalesque political culture, how learning comes through parody, and how caring about world events and caring enough to seek out the news become paramount values in *The Onion*. The renewed emphasis on the virtues of seeking out news and knowledge of current events was perhaps best illustrated the week following the *HFS Onion*. In that edition, readers and journalists were scolded in a story titled, “Shattered Nation Longs to Care About Stupid Bullshit Again.” The graphic accompanying the story chronicles pre-9/11 media obsessions that now looked superfluous: shark attacks, Rep. Gary Condit, Tom Cruise’s love life, the scandals of Elizabeth Taylor, Michael Jackson and Brittany Spears [Figure 4]. Caring about the news, caring about world events, and caring to interrogate the news became the presumed value in the rhetoric of *The Onion*. This kind of headline is, finally, a reward to news junkies: *The Onion* informs and educates its readers, while encouraging them to feel informed, educated, and satisfied. At the same time, nothing is sacred, not even the audience’s complimentary self-image. To inhabit the rhetorical spirit of *The Onion* is to earn the reader the ironic caption on an *Onion* t-shirt: “I am on top of the issues that shape my world.” (p. 38)

Conclusion

If news parodies like *The Onion* can be understood as viable alternatives and supplements to the mainstream news, work remains to understand how news parody figures citizenship as the news

evolves into different forms. After 9/11, *The Onion* was particularly important because the spectacular composition of the terrorist acts disrupted the everyday visual and rhetorical conventions of the news. Disrupting the news made visible the usual, routine news flow and pushed to the surface questions about the everyday operations of news making. By reframing news of the attacks as mediations, *The Onion's* carnivalesque meta-discourse created opportunities to address racism, to address fundamental questions about the motives of the attacks, and to lay out an agenda for learning about the cultures and political histories of the people involved in the war on terror. As *The Onion* shows, the news parody both constructs and participates in a public discussion of values.

The controversy surrounding appropriate speech post-9/11 marked a shift in rhetorical strategies and aesthetic standards in public culture that was long on quick reactions but lacking in tolerance for thoughtful examination. The power of the parody in this moment, the most heavily mediated and watched event in history, lay in its ability to intervene on news media coverage of the events by juxtaposing them against an imitation. The news parody opens a space between the audiences and the mainstream news that punctures conventional news assumptions and playfully detaches itself in order to hold up for examination the styles and topics of the news. This carnivalesque rhetoric acted to momentarily bridge geographic distances and hierarchies between U.S. Americans whose relationship to the victims was once shared and divided by geography. Its employment of grotesque realism, with an emphasis on bodily functions, profanity, scatological themes and other allusions to the body, bring down to earth the terrorists, the media, and the entire news spectacle of 9/11. This rhetoric neither simply negates the topics, styles, nor people it targets, nor does it descend into a despairing nihilism about them. Though everyone, including the reader, is at some point figured a fool by *The Onion*, the jokes are told at the expense of someone or something, and laughter confirms that a judgment has been rendered and a position advanced. This kind of rhetoric can be educational in two different ways. First, the news parody examined here

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remains in a deliberative mode, reaffirming a newspaper's traditional duty to educate citizens and to check power. Instead of calling the terrorists "warriors" as a way to redeem them from the President's condemnation of them as evil, *The Onion* offered tutorials about the Middle East, Islam, and religious tolerance. *The Onion's* parody of the news succeeds after 9/11 by taking up and intervening on pertinent social and historical tensions and inviting a consideration of alternative forms of news. It sometimes challenges and critiques official pieties and disrupts the everyday language and imagery of the news. A second consequence of its jokes lay in its modeling of new rules and standards for public discourse in a time of national crisis. In this sense, as news parody the *Onion* was a useful public deliberation over proper emotional responses to a news-saturated moment, an act of articulating new models for speaking, for acting, and for moving forward.

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Figure 1

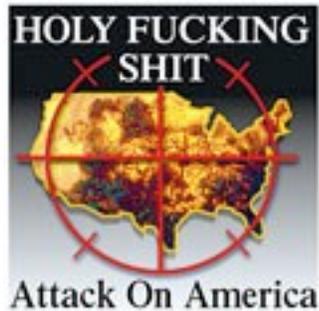


Figure 2

American Life Turns Into Bad Jerry Bruckheimer Movie

September 26, 2001 | Issue 37•34

NEW YORK—In the two weeks since terrorists crashed hijacked planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, American life has come to resemble a bad Jerry Bruckheimer-produced action/disaster movie, shellshocked citizens reported Tuesday.

 ENLARGE IMAGE



An actual scene from real life.

"Terrorist hijackings, buildings blowing up, thousands of people dying—these are all things I'm accustomed to seeing," said Dan Monahan, 32, who witnessed the fiery destruction of the Twin Towers firsthand from the window of his second-story apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn. "I've seen them all before—we all have—on TV and in movies. In movies like *Armageddon*, it seemed silly and escapist. But this, this doesn't have any scenes where Bruce Willis saves the planet and quips a one-liner as he

blows the bad guy up."

www.onion.com, September 26, 2001

Figure 3

[ENLARGE IMAGE](#)

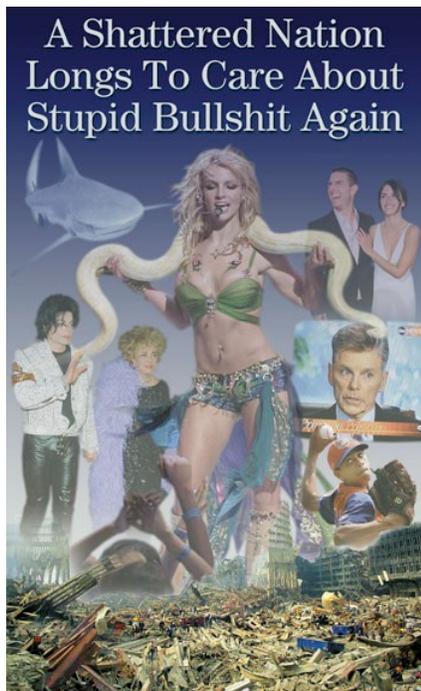


Another scene not from a movie.

When the president finally appeared on TV, it was George W. Bush addressing the nation, not Bill Pullman or Harrison Ford. At the conclusion of his address, Bush did not grab a leggy blonde reporter out of the crowd and kiss her. When Americans finally staggered into the streets, desperate to talk to anyone to try to make sense of what they had just seen, there were no *Attack On America* collector cups waiting for them at Taco Bell. The dead and injured did not, like Jon Voight, stand up in their wheelchairs as the music swelled. And Ben Affleck was nowhere to be seen.

"There are Air Force jets flying over Manhattan and warships in New York harbor, but none of it is exciting or entertaining at all," said Wall Street broker Irwin Trotter, 47, among the lucky ones who walked away from the destruction. "If the world were going to suddenly turn into a movie without warning, I wish it would have been one of those boring, talky Merchant-Ivory ones instead. I hate those movies, but I sure wish we were living in one right now."

Figure 4



ⁱ James der Derian (2002) argues that when the events of 9/11 are regarded in an international context, or arranged as the chronologically most recent of a series of al Qaeda attacks on American targets, 9/11 was not exceptional.

ⁱⁱ For example the announcement of the end of irony, brilliantly put to rest in a mock obituary published in the *Washington Post* (Martin, 2002). In addition to the public screen of newspapers, television, and Internet, I refer to the radio stations that pulled from the airwaves songs with even vague allusions to terrorism, and the movie distributors who postponed the release of *Spiderman*, *Collateral Damage*, and *Big Trouble* because of their allusions to terrorism or to the WTC towers. On television, Fox delayed the debut of *Twenty-Four*, and CBS postponed its release of a new series, *The Agency*. (“How Hollywood is changing,” 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ In these issues, the content of the broadsheet and onion.com are essentially the same. Here, I focus on the two as an aesthetic whole based on the similarities of their purposes as parody and similarities in placement and emphasis of its stories.

^{iv} Carnival employs what Burke called the comic frame, where watching the “first world” make mistakes forms the basis of a moral the audience is uniquely positioned to see. “The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony; it is admonished to remember that when intelligence means wisdom ... it requires fear, resignation, the sense of limits, as an important ingredient.” (Burke, 1937, p. 42)

^v George Lakoff (2001) provides an analysis of how the war frame came to dominate Bush’s rhetoric. The President has continued to argue that war is a better metaphor than crime, most notably in his 2004 State of the Union Address.

^{vi} HBO awarded Maher a new show several months after ABC cancelled *Politically Incorrect*.

^{viii} The same strategy shows up in another image that commented on the odd feeling that the disaster scenes in the images were familiar, this with the caption “Another scene not from a movie” [Figure 3]