



## **Breaking Boundaries: Working Across the Methodological and Epistemological Divide in the Study of Political Entertainment**

DANNAGAL G. YOUNG<sup>1</sup>  
University of Delaware

JONATHAN GRAY  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

In the grand familial drama that is academic disciplinarity, many disciplines act in ways that only make sense if understood through the logic of sibling rivalries. Frequently, related or overlapping disciplines struggle to get out of each other's shadows, like the younger sibling deliberately acting in ways to avoid being compared to the older one. Surely, the nature of academic funding is responsible for at least part of this scramble for differentiation and uniqueness. But it also seems to be driven by somewhat ego-protective notions of what kind of research is legitimate versus what is not, as well as by a defense mechanism governed by the logic that "If I do not acknowledge that it is there, it does not exist." And while some differences between disciplines and approaches are certainly real and merited, the costs of such radical differentiation can be especially apparent when it comes to the pursuit of actual understanding of a certain phenomenon—such as with political entertainment.

In particular, note the excessive parsing and dividing up of subject matter within individual disciplines. For instance, Media and Cultural Studies often surrenders the right or responsibility to examine literature—or anything "old" for that matter—to English literature professors while simultaneously wrestling away from those same professors the right to conduct audience research. Of more direct relevance to our discussion here, consider the simple proposition that Media and Cultural Studies has tended to focus on entertainment media instead of journalism, largely because journalism was already "done" by Journalism and Mass Communication scholars.

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Dannagal G. Young: [dgyoung@udel.edu](mailto:dgyoung@udel.edu)  
Jonathan Gray: [jagray3@wisc.edu](mailto:jagray3@wisc.edu)  
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Political entertainment, though, sits enticingly in the middle. Is it journalism? Is it popular culture? Is it information? Is it entertainment? While this purgatorial status left political entertainment underexamined for years (what is that strange beast—and what do we do with it?), that it took so long to be colonized has rendered this hybrid genre an ideal venue for the kind of multimethodological, multipistemological conversation we offer here. In the postnetwork era, as networks lost viewership and public trust through changes in the technological and economic underpinnings of the television news business, we witnessed an explosion in the number and variety of alternative formats, modes, and genres of available political information. Mass Communication scholars and Political Communication scholars in particular began to recognize the need to account for this important addition to the media environment. Yet such recognition was not immediately shared—or appreciated—by the discipline as a whole. One of the authors of this introduction recalls presenting a paper on “the effects of late-night political jokes” at a 2002 conference of the Annual Political Science Association, only to receive harsh criticism from several panel attendees (mostly older, actually much older political scientists) for deigning to include late-night political humor as a variable in a serious model predicting vote choice. And yet meanwhile, across the way, scholars of Media and Cultural Studies, who had been probing popular culture for years, charting dynamics of politics, meaning, and power, also began noticing this relatively new programming format. They, too, became intrigued to see how it might interact with some of those same issues of power and meaning. Thus, both “sides” began walking closer and closer to one another across this disciplinary no-man’s land.

Gradually, each side began to make out fuzzy silhouettes on the horizon—those of the scholars across the divide. Such is the nature of this foggy no-man’s land that each side has at times simply resolved to ignore the other’s shadow presence. Each of us has been asked to review journal submissions that by and large offer wholly one-sided literature reviews (either effects-oriented articles from mass communication or those that are critical/cultural in approach). Hence, those must be the only scholars researching political entertainment, right? Yet we should be honest enough to admit that each of us has perused tables of contents for journals or books on political entertainment or looked at panels at conferences and realized—whether guiltily or indignantly—that there are many “other” people talking about satire and political entertainment outside of our own circles or divisions.

Recently, though, scholars of political entertainment have begun to cut through the fog and draw ideas, propositions, and evidence from across that great divide. Some effects scholars have begun consulting the theoretical propositions of cultural scholars to anchor their effects mechanisms. Some cultural scholars, meanwhile, have begun looking to the larger-scale audience research offered by media effects research to bolster their claims of influence and impact. On a very simple, yet no less profound level, therefore, this call to break boundaries in the examination of political entertainment is merely a formal recognition of the theoretically rich advancements in understanding that come from such cross-domain conversations. We propose that to do our jobs better, to truly capture the important role that this hybrid form of information is playing in our postmodern political environment, we must read and understand the work of our siblings and engage with them in the pursuit of the answers to these questions.

The idea for this special collection evolved out of a three-day long symposium, held at the University of Delaware in April 2011 and co-organized by Dannagal Young and R. Lance Holbert. Funded by the University's Center for Political Communication, the symposium brought together scholars across discipline, method, and epistemology to discuss the content, study, and impact of political entertainment. For three days, the scholars met, discussed, ate, drank, and even attended a special lecture by Joe Randazzo, then editor-in-chief of the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*. Throughout the conversations, effects scholars found themselves saying to the cultural scholars, "We do have empirical evidence confirming that very proposition," while cultural scholars found themselves saying, "We've been talking about these larger issues of power and meaning for years! Haven't you read Bourdieu?" And, voila (homage to Bourdieu), collaborations, even friendships, emerged.

Yet we would be limiting the utility of this project if we were merely to advocate for the breaking of boundaries only in the study of political entertainment. Surely, political entertainment is not a special, liminal space of play. Certainly, interdisciplinarity is not a pursuit specific to the object of inquiry. In fact, the goals of this collection extend beyond the study of political entertainment. Clearly, we believe that the topic of political entertainment demands of scholars that they read the quantitative and the critical/cultural. But we also hope that this special issue will serve two other goals. First, by its offering two approaches to a similar subject matter through the pairing of essays—each with its own flaws and merits—readers will see the benefits of breaking boundaries in the realm of scholarship outside of political entertainment. Second, we hope to model the value of collaboration across divides. It is perhaps inevitable that critical/cultural scholars will roll their eyes at the positivism and perceived lack of reflection of their quantitative counterparts, just as those quantitative scholars will scoff at the perceived over-reliance on interpretation and theory of their critical/cultural opposites. As the exchange between Michael Delli Carpini and Jeffrey Jones in this volume suggests, there is no small conceptual difference in these approaches but rather fundamental and important differences in both opinion and epistemology. However, instead of seeing these differences as incommensurable, perhaps offering essays across these divides will help readers envision the benefits of collaboration.

Such collaborations could take the dialogic form modeled in this collection, or more ambitious still, they could take the form of working together on one project. If critical/cultural scholars do not like the way quantitative scholars define their terminology and ask their questions, they could work together to develop new terminology. If quantitative scholars are concerned by how idiosyncratic a critical/cultural scholar's interpretation is, they could test it, try to replicate it, or assess its reliability. If critical/cultural scholars worry that quantitative work is blind to qualitative detail, they could inform quantitative surveys and experiments with an initial qualitative component. If quantitative scholars feel that critical theory is unresponsive to empirical observation, they could work with critical/cultural scholars to develop new theories that are more responsive, and so forth.

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The concept behind this special issue is that writers would work in pairs, each with a common (if sometimes loosely defined) topic within the broader field of political entertainment. Often, then, the "discussion" between chapters is to be constructed by the reader in the process of reading both. But the

issue begins in earnest with Michael Delli Carpini and Jeffrey Jones' broader explorations of methodological divides. Delli Carpini engages in an interesting thought experiment, trying to disarticulate positivism from quantitative methodology, not so much to do away with positivism—for he defends its role in research—but to call for a productive space in which quantitative methodologies may be used for a wider variety of projects and to help encourage critical/cultural scholars to check their well-known suspicion of positivism at the door. Jones then responds directly to Delli Carpini. His article expresses significant concern with the baggage that he sees in positivism and, in turn, with what quantitative scholarship brings to the study of political entertainment, specifically, and politically relevant media, more generally. Drawing from Michel Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth," Jones argues that the former regime of "objective journalism" has been discredited and disavowed, yet he sees quantitative scholarship as too wedded to this regime in its own method. He challenges scholars to seize the moment to appropriate a new, interdisciplinary language so as to embrace conceptually bold and innovative projects that facilitate collaboration, thus moving beyond the old regime to one more appropriate for the age of political entertainment media.

Following this initial explicit tackling of methodology and what is at stake, we then turn to our five pairings: Geoffrey Baym and Lindsay Hoffman each examine partisan language and interviews in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and/or *The Colbert Report*; Lauren Feldman and Paul Brewer examine satirical treatments of science; Amber Day and Heather LaMarre address the importance of Stephen Colbert's Super PAC; Dannagal G. Young and Roderick Hart discuss *The Daily Show's* treatment of political participation, citizenship, and social protest; and finally Megan Hill and R. Lance Holbert each wrestle with developing a normative approach to political satire.

As these articles argue, political entertainment is, and has been, entrenched in American political life (and world politics as well; see Baym & Jones' [2012] "Not Necessarily the News? News Parody and Political Satire Across the Globe," in *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 10, 1–2). With these essays, we hope to broaden the study of this phenomenon to include more varied and cooperative examinations of these hybrid texts, how they work, what we want from them, and what we can do with them. We know that political entertainment matters. It matters enough for us to treat it with a multipistemological, multidisciplinary, multimethodological approach. We hope that this collection will enrich a dialogue that will encourage such an approach and prompt more of our readers to acknowledge and build upon the work of their peers. In the language of sibling rivalry: "It's time for these kids to start talking to each other." After all, it's likely that each one has something valuable to add to the conversation.