Laughing So Hard I Could Cry: Analyzing the Satire Scare

According to us, satire is saving our nation. It is correcting the misinformation of the news, holding politicians accountable, and helping reframe citizenship in ways that productively combine entertainment and engagement. It is also opening up through new media to allow citizens to be not just consumers, but also creators of content and political information. What’s the downside? There has to be a downside, right? This can’t possibly be good. Given that we have shown a radical shift in the role of satire in affecting public thinking, should we be afraid? Does this mean democracy is doomed? Worry from all sides of the political spectrum frets that satire is mocking the nation and undermining the core values of our country. What are the real concerns here? Are any of them valid?

As with any major shift, change can mean the loss of valuable qualities. In this case, the loss of serious news reporting consumed by a large sector of our nation is generally considered in all quarters to be a bad outcome. But, as we’ve explained, satire did not create that loss, if anything, it has come to occupy such a central role in informing our nation as a reaction to that loss. So one key and ongoing dilemma is that satire is often blamed for the conditions that it ridicules. True, today satire does exert influence over the news, but it got that power precisely because the public lost faith in the news process and because the news itself was doing such a lousy job. So blaming satire for its public role seems to make little sense. That hasn’t stopped the skeptics though: you can find essays and articles and opinion pieces that criticize and condemn satire.

But the worry doesn’t stop there. The satire scare is much deeper than the issue of its role in news reporting and in shaping the public’s knowledge base. Skeptics worry that satire is (1) too cynical (2) too persuasive (3) not persuasive enough (4) too confusing (5) too pedantic (6) too popular (7) too subtle (8) too brash (9) too close to news (10) not newsy enough (11) too fun, and (12) not funny enough. P. J. O’Rourke tells us “Satire doesn’t effect change.” Arnold Zwicky claims that “Satire in general is dangerous.” They can’t both be right, right? What is fascinating for us is the fact that researchers come at the issue from opposing sides, suggesting, at least anecdotally, that satire might be getting it just right. In fact, as we explained
in our chapter on the art of satire and irony, it is precisely the ambiguous, open nature of satire that makes its impact an open door. That openness, though, leads to lots of worries that satire shames people into agreeing with it, that it alienates people who don’t get the joke, and that it can be offensive. Satire doesn’t have a clear expected outcome, even if its hope is to spark critical thinking. That vagueness is at the heart of much of the worry about the dangers of the comedic mode. We argue, though, that that vagueness is exactly why satire shouldn’t scare us. What is scary is the reality that satire mocks and the possibility that the audience for the joke can’t apprehend that reality even with the help of satire.

While most of the concerns about satire are framed speculatively, there is a significant body of research that attempts to quantify data on these issues. In the first section of this chapter, we cover the research that puts satire alongside news as a source of public information. Not only is it noteworthy that satire always scores higher on these polls and surveys, but we also find it significant that satire holds a place alongside traditional news in these studies. As we explained in chapter 3, such a shift is a remarkable change in the way we understand news media today. One odd outcome is that because satire is often considered alongside news, it is then held up to the same standards for reporting. That logic is completely flawed. It is clearly true that we often learn more from satire than the news—especially if we are younger—but it makes no sense to then conclude that satire is the same as news. The next two sections of the chapter look at the scholarly research beginning with the skeptics and concluding with the optimists. While we hope to point out the various findings of these studies, we also hope to show how hard it is to get conclusive evidence of impact from a comedic genre that specifically avoids prescribed outcomes and that is meant to provoke a process of critical reflection that takes place over time. In a certain sense the mere idea of empirical, data-driven research on satire defies logic. How can one craft a controlled study in the context of satire? We understand the urge to have hard answers to these questions; we are, after all, living in an era where having facts is especially comforting. And we would love to be able to prove without a shadow of a doubt that satire is, indeed, saving us. But, as it turns out, we are the ones responsible for that. Satire’s job is to motivate us to try.

**Satire Hits the Big (News) Leagues**

If you’ve seen Jon Stewart on any show other than his own, you’ve probably heard him denounce the idea that his show is a source of news, probably by making reference to “puppets making crank calls” preceding his show on Comedy Central. You’ve also probably heard people say—critically—that young people are turning on *The Daily Show* instead of the news. And yet, much of the way satire is criticized and studied today seems to be based on the premise that it is enough like news that it is okay to treat it as such. One of the ways in which this happens is that satire gets lumped into the mainstream media in research into the effects of news programming. In this section, we will take a look at how satire is getting a seat at the real news table, even as its loudest critics denounce it for failing to do what news should—sufficiently inform and educate the public.