

Satire is shaping the next generation of american citizens

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(Phys.org)—Satire has always played an important role in democracy, but a current group of television satirists are more influential than ever with American citizens, particularly younger ones, according to a Penn State researcher.

Sophia McClennen, professor of international affairs and [comparative literature](#), said that [Stephen Colbert](#) and Jon Stewart, like Jonathan Swift and Benjamin Franklin before them, use satire and parody to poke fun at politics and society with the hope that the humor increases awareness and motivates change.

"What satire does is reveal the folly of the human condition and most, but not all, of satire has a political angle to it," said McClennen. "Satire is different from typical political humor because it demands critical reflection on the part of the audience, so the laughter isn't the end of the joke."

McClennen writes in her book, *Colbert's America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), that Colbert's type of satire is playing an important role in [American democracy](#) because, in a media environment with a 24-hour news cycle that increasingly blends news and entertainment to attract viewers, young people are seeking more engaging sources of news and information.

[Comedy Central](#)'s *Colbert Report* and *Jon Stewart Show* are not just popular entertainment shows with the younger generation, according to

McClennen, they are also cited by younger viewers as important news sources. She said that the ability of these comedians to entertain, while prompting critical reflection is the key to raising awareness about political and social issues discussed on the shows.

"I think what's happening is, younger views are tuning into the Colbert Report, and then after the show they are going out and actively looking into the issues," said McClennen.

As an example of Colbert's ability to stir activism, she writes that he has instigated campaigns from the silly—naming a Hungarian bridge after himself—to the serious—donating to Japanese tsunami relief—that were embraced by his fans.

McClennen writes that Colbert's show averages more than a million viewers for each episode, and he has more than 1.9 million Twitter followers. In 2008, when Colbert briefly ran for president, he had a million Facebook users sign up to back his campaign.

Colbert does a twist on satire by adding parody to his routine, McClennen said. The comedian portrays a conservative television commentator modeled on Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly.

"He has to be the thing he doesn't like, the guy he detests," said McClennen. "Colbert is essentially saying, 'you have been suckered into pundit culture, then I'm going to be the biggest pundit there is.'"

Colbert has been able to not only raise awareness, but change the dialogue at times, too. He coined terms like, "truthiness" to describe when people believe something without facts to support it and "wikiality" to describe the ability to edit out parts of reality that people do not like.

McClennen writes that several factors are increasing the importance of the Colbert Report and other shows that use political satire. The rise of fundamentalist religious groups, the increasing power of corporations in the media and a deep divide between political parties are harming the democratic process in the country, McClennen said.

"These are harming the democracy in a pretty direct way," she said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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