



## **Cake and Conclusions: Rhetorical Roots in "Sheetcaking" and Fallacious Community Responses**

**Marissa Lammon**

University of Colorado Boulder

Boulder, Colorado

[m.lammon@outlook.com](mailto:m.lammon@outlook.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

The convergence of politics and comedy within political entertainment has created a new environment, dissemination of information, and formation of public opinion. In response to white nationalist rallies, comedian Tina Fey utilized her political comedy platform to satirically comment on the inaction of several privileged consumers. Community response to the satirical skit reflected the complexity of satire as rhetorical strategy, notably when present online and within popular culture discourse, and the cognitive demands that result in fallacious tendencies. The following examines the fallacies that arise in response to Fey's satirical message and the implications for political entertainment media.

**Keywords:** Saturday Night Live, Tina Fey, fallacious rhetoric, political satire, social activism, political entertainment, political discourse, popular discourse

On August 12, 2017, hundreds of armed, white nationalists rallied in the streets of Charlottesville. In response to earlier protests combating police brutality and racial profiling, a group of approximately 250 predominantly white males marched in a torchlight procession through the University of Virginia campus, encouraging far-right ideals and bigotry. Carrying nationalist flags and lit torches, the group shouted racist, discriminatory slogans: “White lives matter! Blood and soil! You will not replace us! Jews will not replace us!” (Heim, 2017). The group continued through Charlottesville and navigated through the University of Virginia campus grounds. With no intervention by authorities, a small group of students from the University of Virginia formed a counter-protest. The group of approximately 30 students locked arms around the base of the University’s Thomas Jefferson statue and prepared to face the protestors. When both groups met, extreme violence erupted – chemicals were sprayed, rocks were thrown, and a car barreled into a group of unarmed bystanders. The chaos progressed and 24 hours later, three fatalities were reported. The events were addressed later by White House officials through attribution of blame to not just the neo-Nazi groups responsible for the initial protest, with president Trump claiming “there is blame on both sides” and backing his statements as correct opposed to purely political (Merica, 2017).

### **“LET THEM EAT CAKE”**

In response to the Charlottesville protests, comedian Tina Fey performed a skit on *Saturday Night Live*’s Weekend Update. In a University of Virginia sweatshirt, Fey addressed several political figures for their incompetence, ridiculing President Donald Trump on multiple fronts for his political etiquette and response to the rallies:

Our president, Donald J. Trump – which I don’t think people talk enough about what a stupid jackass name that is... whatever, he gets away with it ‘cause he’s gorgeous – anyway, Donny John comes out and says that he condemns violence on many sides. And I’m feeling sick ‘cause you know, I’ve seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and I wasn’t confused by it. Nazis are always bad... And then Donny Johnny says we need to defend our country’s beautiful confederate monuments when you know he would take them down in a second if he thought he could build a bunch of poorly constructed condos on the spot (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

Fey continues to highlight the inherent flaws of several other political figures including Ann Coulter and Paul Ryan, attacking their intelligence and evasions:

When Ann Coulter crawls out of her Roach Motel and says, ‘Antifa attacked Republicans in Berkeley,’ and you’re like, ‘Okay, Yard-Sale Barbie’... I say, where’s Paul Ryan in all of this? You’re supposed to be the cool, young congressman but you don’t know how to @ someone on Twitter? ‘Racism is bad @realDonaldTrump,’ you pussy (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

By highlighting the faults of the current political figures, Fey establishes a rationale for satirical attacks. These justifications then serve as a foundation for the overall satirical message and a necessary component to engaging in effective satire.

Beyond critique of several politicians, Fey transitions to a significant rhetorical goal, satirically encouraging inaction by highlighting the idleness of several middle-class women privileged with an ability to disregard national controversies:

I don’t want any more people to get hurt and I know a lot of us are feeling anxious and we’re asking ourselves, ‘what can I do?’ and so I would urge people this Saturday

instead of participating in the screaming matches and potential violence, find a local business. Order a cake with an American flag on it. And just eat it... Sheetcaking is a grassroots movement – most of the women I know have been doing it once a week since the election... I really want to encourage all the good, sane Americans to treat these rallies like the opening of a thoughtful movie with two female leads – don't show up (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

By commenting on the anxieties many Americans felt at the time and simultaneously remarking on the stress-eating solution many privileged women partake in, Fey provides the community with a message that aims to highlight the ridiculousness and ineffectiveness of inaction, through uniquely complex rhetorical strategies.

### COMMUNITY OUTRAGE

Headlines broke almost immediately after the skit, claiming Tina Fey “suggests eating sheet cake over protesting alt-right rallies” (Fox News, 2017), and that “we fight Nazism with sheet cake” (Fox News, 2017; Hirsh, 2017). Articles argued her “eat cake strategy after Charlottesville is bad advice” and “the epitome of white privilege” (Dommu, 2017; Zimmerman, 2017;). News media from both political sides reported on the literal interpretation of Fey's statements, suggesting to consumers that Fey was offering a solution that in fact involved urging people to stay home and eat sheet cake rather than participate in political protests (Fox News, 2017). News articles offered brief descriptions of the content of Fey's argument and provided the video for consumers to make their own judgments – after having been told what her intentions were.

Literal interpretations and subsequent criticisms extended beyond news media and further permeated social media, where several outraged users administered personal attacks on the comedian and her status as a wealthy white woman:

“Tina Fey represents some of the worst impulses of liberal white women who can't see beyond themselves” (Jade, 2017).

“Love Tina Fey, but I'm REALLY not feeling her ‘Ignore racism and stress-eat instead’ take. It strikes me as willfully naïve and privileged.” (Tom and Lorenzo, 2017).

“Also, Tina Fey has a long history of insensitive/appropriate/racist jokes and then digging in her heels when she's called out.” (Menta, 2017).

“Instead of eating cake and parroting provably-failed tactics, Tina Fey could simply fill all the GoFundMes for Black people injured on a12.” (Gorcenski, 2017).

“Tina Fey adapts ‘don't show up’ as an anti-facism strategy from her years of doing the same for people of color, queer people, lower-clas-” (Edison, 2017).

Other users focused their attention on her “eat cake” claims, with surface-level interpretations that remark on the inappropriateness of stress-eating and the absurdity of suggesting to do so:

“...did Tina Fey really just ‘Let Them Eat Cake’ this shit” (Devon of Nine, 2017)

“tina fey telling people who historically don't show up to fight white supremacy to not show up is... well, it's consistent” (Kindred, 2017)

“...let's dismantle white supremacy and THEN we deserve to stay at home and yell into cake.” (Drase, 2017).

“I can’t. Really? Eat cake instead of fight? Y’all been doing that since day one for us. Switch it up.” (Nissel, 2017).

Ironically, the outrage with Fey’s suggestion to stress eat as a coping strategy for political and social turmoil solidifies the argument Fey satirically makes. The difference, though, is that Fey offers up a mirror to which audience members avoid the reflection; instead, they recognize the absurdity in inaction during chaotic tragedies, yet fail to recognize Fey’s illustration that such a strategy does exist among the privileged: “most of the women I know have been doing it once a week since the election” (Saturday Night Live, 2017). Fey utilizes her comedy platform to highlight the problems with wealthy, privileged individuals remaining idle during times of distress.

Media that do acknowledge the satire behind Fey’s claims report on the inappropriateness considering the solemn topic: “I’m seeing some ‘TINA FEY SATIRE!!1!’ this morning. Like, even if that’s true (which IDK IDK), satire doesn’t WORK when reality is insane.” (Donna stole Roy Kent’s Rolex, 2017). Articles include commentary on the realization that “Fey is a comedian, not an activist” but suggest “that justification [is] lazy when the comedian in question is talking about actual Nazis on an ostensibly political show” (Kane, 2017). Such responses touch on the components of the Political Satire Appropriateness Model outlined by Lance Holbert (2016). The model suggests that the appropriateness of political satire consists of perceived social threat and human flaw of the satirized, and the audience interpretation of the satire is therefore dependent on the level of agreement between what the satirist and the satirees view as appropriate. The current model suggests that the existence of prior background knowledge into the satirical attacks as well as the satirized are necessary components to the reception of satire as a rhetorical goal. However, the model fails to acknowledge the influence of media platforms as well as potential contributions to fallacious responses.

## **POLITICAL ENTERTAINMENT**

The use of multiple platforms to disperse information during conflict or tragedy has become thoroughly rooted in mass communication, particularly in instances of political events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010). Anxiety surrounding political issues prompts interest and increased attention to news through amplified emotional engagement, and scholars have uncovered political entertainment models as a means to maintain political relevance in the present media environment (Lee & Kwak, 2014; Esralew & Young, 2012). Traditionally separate entities, politics and humor have converged in late-night talk shows and sketch comedies to reach young viewers while employing relatively high levels of awareness and engagement in politics (Baumgartner et al., 2012; Holbert et al., 2013). Unlike journalism and news media restraints centered on critique and analysis, political entertainment shows such as *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) mimic real-world events and figures, theoretically influencing public opinion on politics and the political information environment (Abel & Barther, 2013).

A unique component to political entertainment derives from the characterizations of the humor presented within them. Late-night comedy sketches have positioned themselves as central to the political media environment and feature political humor identified as “predominantly aggressive and unflattering toward politics” through the emphasis and mimicry of political figures and process failures (Esralew & Young, 2012; Moy & Pfau, 2000). Despite the lack of legitimacy neither confirmed nor denied by news media regarding opinions and portrayals demonstrated by comedians in political entertainment, comedians are able to generate debate regarding political issues and candidates through humorous sketches, as their content is seen as trustworthy by consumers (Abel & Barther, 2013).

### ***Saturday Night Live***

Identified by academia as an institution with serious political clout, *SNL* has been incorporating

comedy and critical thinking into audiences since 1975 (Abel & Barther, 2013; Reinheld, 2006). In their attempts to “rejuvenate television creativity” and facilitate a substantial impact on social consciousness, the writers and producers of *SNL*’s Weekend Update have long devoted a significant amount of time and attention to traditional news media (Reinheld, 2006, p.190). Building on comic commentary and satirical genres in the early 1960s, *SNL* aimed to reconstruct television comedy and did so through the use of political parody and genuine administration of information – what they considered to be a stark contrast to the traditional news media – and allowed audiences access to information dispersion with heightened authenticity (Day & Thompson, 2012).

Characterized by their authenticity and uncensored presentations, comedians on *SNL* occupy a unique position in political communication, news, and persuasion (Day & Thompson, 2012). *SNL* in particular allows for comedians to perform a specific political message from a particular lens that is familiar to the audience, allowing media to highlight familiar concepts that facilitate consumer judgments (Baumgartner et al., 2012).

A large portion of the familiar content within *SNL* is related to political figures and campaigns. As early as 1975, *SNL* has been utilizing parodies of presidential candidates as a rhetorical strategy and entertainment model, stressing negative portrayals and attention to political life and playing a significant role in the formation of public opinion (Baumgartner et al., 2012). Notably, the impersonation of Sarah Palin by Tina Fey in 2008 resulted in *SNL*’s “largest audience in over 14 years” and elicited a significant public debate as to the effect the skit had on Palin’s ratings (Esrawlew & Young, 2012). Coined the “Fey Effect,” literature extensively reviewed the influence that not only political comedy may have on public opinion, but also how specific celebrity figures can enhance this effect. Interestingly, comedic performances “draw upon the star’s biography and personalized observational humor,” exposing versions of themselves that can be manipulated and performed within different frameworks and thereby contribute to the interpretation of their messages (Patterson, 2012, p. 235). In fact, the caricature of Palin became a source of anticipation by consumers in instances where the vice-presidential candidate would exemplify poor performance to the public. Viewers anticipating Fey’s parody of Palin contributed to the surge in *SNL*’s ratings, attracting their largest audience in over 14 years and eliciting an academic discussion on the influence of celebrity figures in shaping public opinion (Esrawlew & Young, 2012).

### **Tina Fey**

The potential influence of comedy on political campaigns, remarkable in itself, gains attention when considering the social position of the comedian. As a highly male-dominated industry, comedy television rarely includes women satirists, positioning Tina Fey as “the most visibly successful female comedian in contemporary U.S. media” (Hmielowski et al., 2011; Patterson, 2012, p. 232). The Western concept that women are not funny and comedy is a male talent has contributed to the masculinizing of comedy for centuries. Political comedy shows have historically been predominantly male and casts have outwardly dispersed their anti-female comedian views in the early productions. Early *SNL* comedian John Belushi publicly ranted on the humorless nature of women and threatened his resignation if all female writers were not fired from the show (Hill & Weingrad, 1986). Softer judgements have been further placed on women comedians where Michael O’Donoghue, *SNL*’s first head writer, attributed the success of male comedians to the “hunk of meat between [their] legs” (Hill & Weingrad, 1986, p. 244). Given the history of marginalization toward women in the comedy realm, the positioning of Tina Fey as *SNL*’s first female head writer in 1999 established her success in contemporary culture.

Scholars argue that the construction of Fey’s public image derives from various mediated discourses within a contemporary media environment and her role as a feminist identity functioning within feminist politics (Patterson, 2012). With the assumption that patriarchal systems have established themselves as superior, postfeminism has allowed for the transformation of “feminist political ideals and practices into

individual attitudes and lifestyle choices” (Patterson, 2012, p. 235). This in turn creates an environment in which conscious choices regarding identity influence public perception and feminine agency, highlighting the importance of Fey’s political framework and comedic content. An analysis of Fey’s work as a comedian reveals an ample amount of blunt, self-deprecating humor and satire that aim to highlight real-world issues such as gender inequality and hegemonic femininity (Patterson, 2012). Fey has consistently utilized unique rhetorical strategies that are purposefully multifaceted and designed to produce social change.

## **RHETORIC IN ONLINE DISCOURSE**

Political themes pervade history where rhetoric as the art of persuasion historically began as the practice of and participation in political science (Cline, 2006). The nature of the political system in ancient Greece demanded community participation and effective speech, particularly the ability to speak in one’s best interest. This resulted in the emergence of Sophists, teachers of rhetoric as the art of persuasion that believed politics and law could be influenced by man (Leggett, 2012). Later rhetoricians such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle saw the original sophistic view of rhetoric as an injustice where language was being used as a tool for manipulation. Aristotelian rhetoric established the logical, ethical, and psychological components to persuasion and identified rhetoric as the ability to see what is persuasive in every given case – transitioning away from the ability to persuade to include the ability to recognize persuasion (Zalta, 2010).

### **Satire**

Under Aristotle, rhetoric became about the intellectual and philosophical development of what should be said and how best to say it, particular to the given case (Gross & Dascal, 2001; Murphy, Katula, & Hoppmann, 2013). Different strategies subsequently arose that involved a series of adaptations according to the particular environment, audience, and purpose, varying in complexity and audience engagement. Among them, one of the most cognitively demanding rhetorical strategies of satire appears in a select number of media outlets. According to Burke (1984), humorous appeals “imply attitudes and courses of action,” by producing heightened consciousness and enabling audiences to notice the problems at hand (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2010). This form of humor has transitioned in presentation from its early modern characterizations as conservative and supportive of dominant ideologies to a contemporary critique of society and its institutional structures (Colletta, 2009). This new form of satire incorporates humor with a cognitively demanding reflection of society and dominant norms that requires a unique amount of audience engagement to be effective.

Given its cognitive demands, satire often produces incongruity among intended versus received message, indirectly thwarting satire’s rhetorical force (Boukes et. al, 2015; LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). The process audience members must partake in for the satire to be effective involves recognizing incongruity among the words and current knowledge, examining alternative explanations or interpretations, and critically deciding about the author’s knowledge or beliefs (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2010). This is primarily because the essential structure of the rhetorical strategy is designed to deceive and require recognition of deception:

...the audience is expected to assimilate the special mixture of aggression, play, laughter, and judgement that is set before it. Each of these alone can create difficulties... satire usually causes trouble, not merely because it is an attack and a judgment, but also because satire, at its most complex, demands its audience be sophisticated, sensitive, and sympathetic: sophisticated about the audience context in which the satire transpires, sensitive to the means at work, and sympathetic in sharing the aggression and judgment (Test, 1991).

The effectiveness, then, derives from several working facets centered on satirist delivery, audience engagement,

and media environment.

### **Political Satire**

Examining political entertainment and humor itself reveals irony and satire as primary rhetorical strategies. As an institution with profound implications in the political news media realm, *SNL* incorporates sketches replete with satirical messages and thereby plays an essential role in the cultivation of American TV satire (Reincheld, 2006). Yet, satirical messages in a political realm are more often misinterpreted through the increase in audience engagement. Adding a political element to satirical messages simultaneously heightens complexity and audience comprehension demands, requiring audience members to deconstruct messages using existing knowledge of political events, figures, and crises, that is often obtained through consumption of other media texts (Boukes et al., 2015; Holbert & Young, 2012;). Considering its exploration of controversial topics, political satire incorporates a cognitively demanding message with dichotomous political ideologies in which potential misfires evolve from feelings of personal attack. The sarcastic humor embedded in political satire evokes such responses that engage viewers on a news media as well as emotional level, which allows for political entertainment content to be processed with biases and “reinterpreted in ways that serve to reinforce political viewpoints” (Lee & Kwak, 2014; LaMarre et al., 2009). By presenting political content that is often dichotomous in nature due to political affiliation and ideologies, political satire has more potential than satire alone to spark an emotional identification/separation.

Tina Fey’s absurd suggestion to binge eat sheet cake in place of participation in political activism is a clear demonstration of satire as a rhetorical strategy, but also representative of the complexities involved with adding a political element. Fey exemplifies a modern approach to satire through humor centered on a direct disapproval of social and political elements that currently exist in society. Her deliberate jokes against political figures like President Trump for his business-oriented background and Paul Ryan for his illiteracy on social media despite being the “cool, young congressman” are derivative of critical reflection of America’s political representation (Saturday Night Live, 2017). Fey advances her critique of society through arguments that indisputably condemn the events in Charlottesville:

The next time you see a bunch of white boys in polo shirts screaming about taking our country back and you want to scream ‘It’s not our country, we stole it from the Native Americans...’ And when they have a peaceful protest at Standing Rock, we shoot at them with rubber bullets, but we let you chinless turds march through the streets with semi-automatic weapons (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

Further, her suggestion of “sheet-caking” followed by her claims that “most of the women I know have been doing it once a week since the election” incorporates humor into her public disapproval of privileged stress-eating in place of political activism (Saturday Night Live, 2017).

Considering the purposeful irony within satirical messages and the information processing theories in which people process ambiguous information in ways that favor their social selves, the incorporation of political ideologies into complex rhetorical strategies involves the underlying cognitive processes in which the message is interpreted, encoded, stored, and retrieved (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). Fey’s critiques of society’s institutions and events like Standing Rock require political and social awareness with an accompanying understanding of the events. Such involvement reflects the tendencies of audiences to misinterpret information or engage in fallacious responses as a result of error in the information processing system or lack of context.

## FALLACIOUS COMMUNITY RESPONSES

This outside force in shaping responses to satirical messages accompanied with the human tendency to process information in a dichotomous structure inevitably contributes to unintended, ineffective rhetorical discourse. Tracing back to the foundations of rhetoric, Aristotle outlined the basic human functional capabilities including the ability to reason and engage in critical reflection, and further essentialists reflected upon his outline as a lack in any of these areas results in a lack of humanness (Nussbaum, 1992). According to Aristotle, fallacious arguments are those that appear to be refutations but illustrate delusions opposed to reasoning (Hasper, 2012).

### **Ad Hominem**

The *ad hominem* fallacy involves the digression away from a person's argument onto an irrelevant personal attack against the individual themselves. These attacks can introspectively be deemed irrelevant, yet aim to discredit an individual on the basis of illegitimacy (Yap, 2012). Yet, regardless of the relevance or justification of the personal attacks, an *ad hominem* argument can undoubtedly influence an arguer's credibility and public perceptions. Stating that Tina Fey "represents some of the worst impulses of liberal white women who can't see beyond themselves" fails to acknowledge the content of Fey's claims and instead fallaciously attacks the comedian for her status as liberal, white, and female (Jade, 2017). Doing so illegitimizes her status as a public figure with credible political and activist opinion, despite her success in the comedy industry and her social and political involvement. Although Fey's success in comedy and overcoming oppression within the industry has established a sense of *eunoia* (appeal to good will) embedded within her message, even those with a positive attitude toward Fey as a comedian and public figure respond negatively toward the satire:

I adore both Tina Fey and sheet cake. But let's dismantle white supremacy and THEN we deserve to stay at home and yell into cake (Drase, 2017).

Love Tina Fey, but I'm REALLY not feeling her 'Ignore racism and stress-eat instead' take. It strikes me as willfully naïve and privileged (Tom & Lorenzo, 2017).

My love for Tina Fey and my devotion to cake are at odds with the terrible advice to not actively fight fascism (@evenglezos).

Where Fey's résumé builds a theoretically powerful appeal to good will, the misinterpretations of the satirical message contribute to fallacious tendencies centered on discrediting the satirist.

This fallacy is most effective in discounting a particular argument by raising doubt regarding an arguer's credibility, notably in highlighting inconsistencies within the person's claims and behaviors (Walton, 2008). Social media extended their dismantlement of Fey's claims to the audience's perception of Fey's own inaction: "Instead of eating cake and parroting provably-failed tactics, Tina Fey could simply fill all the GoFundMes for Black people injured on a12" (Gorcenski, 2017). Attempting to illustrate an absence of genuine concern for the community through inaction in parallel territories, users responded to Fey's sheetcaking with *ad hominem* fallacious tendencies that attack her credibility. These arguments aim to discredit Fey's claims by emphasizing her previous work as "insensitive, inappropriate, [and] racist" and commenting on her current work as undoubtedly consistent, being "willfully naïve and privileged" (Menta, 2017; Tom & Lorenzo, 2017).

Further, Fey's political views contribute to audience perception of her as part of a specific political affiliation and therefore function for consumers as a rationale behind illegitimizing her from representing the entire affiliate. Identifying Fey as a liberal white woman in combination with her outward condemnation of members of the Republican party contributes to the attacks on her credibility as a woman with liberal views. The opposing group is portrayed in a positive light where the liberal community is denounced for being led

by Fey, with social media users urging one another to avoid her claims by arguing that Fey is not “a person to listen to when it comes to race,” and consumers ought to associate themselves with more credible, deserving historical women.

### **False Dilemma**

Equally unsupported and flawed in reasoning is the *false dilemma* fallacy. Emphasized by dichotomous media coverage and bias information processing, arguments rooted in *false dilemma* presume “an unjustified false division of an issue into but two propositions” (Lewinski, 2014, p. 203). The invalid arguments extend flawed deductive reasoning, presenting a contrary position as a contradiction by presenting only two arguments. Essentially adopting a binary perspective, responses to Tina Fey’s “sheetcaking” further divided the community into two categories: conservatives and liberals, whites and blacks, those that accept the satire and those that reject it.

Where the technical, news media approach to addressing the rallies outwardly urged citizens to engage in social activism, Fey’s comedic, satirical approach was positioned by consumers as the “other” argument – which, in previous analysis, was fallaciously articulated to be inaccurate, inappropriate, and noncredible. Users separate the democratic affiliation into leftists that meticulously “mass [movements] of solidarity” and liberals that preposterously suggest “[ignoring] racism and stress [eating] instead” (@LanaDelRaytheon; Tom and Lorenzo, 2017). The dichotomy within *false dilemma* separates the responses of different democratic affiliates and derides one over the other.

The alt-right rallies arguably began as a result of dichotomous media coverage and the immense separation and maltreatment of black versus white individuals. Beyond criticizing Fey’s position as a white woman, consumers remarked on the differences between whites and blacks, both in Fey’s skit and successive responses:

“i wonder if Tina Fey knows the idea that ‘black men are threatening’ is the same racist idea that gets them knee-jerk shot by police hmmm” (Harderson, 2017).

“So about Tina Fey... not all drag queens are Black and not all Black men are prone to violent behavior” (Robles, 2017).

“Hoooh boy, the stark difference of opinion on Tina Fey form white people and PoC right now speaks volumes about perspective and experience” (@SidzenKane).

The negative or positive interpretation of Fey’s satire largely stems from the separation of white and black that has permeated media outlets prior to the events in Charlottesville. Many consumers disregarded Fey’s attempts to elicit social change due to her status as a white woman, adopting a “you’re with me or against me” mentality: “I can’t. Really? Eat cake instead of fight? Y’all been doing that since day one for us. Switch it up.” (Nissel, 2017). The division of the majority and minority therefore contributes to the discrediting of Fey as a satirist as well as the fallacious, dichotomous responses rooted in *false dilemma*.

The *false dilemma* fallacy further created a separation of those that understood and accepted Fey’s satire, and those that either adopted a literal interpretation or rejected the message on the basis of inappropriateness. Literal interpretations and rejections saturated social media, leaving consumers shocked and repulsed by Fey’s supposed solution to “literally – ‘eat cake’” (Higgins, 2017). Those that accepted the satirical message and accomplished the rhetorical goal critically attempted to illustrate to those that “didn’t get it”:

“I’m muting anyone who doesn’t understand that Tina Fey is a comedian and was making a joke. We can still have jokes right?” (Terminally Chill, 2017).

“Did you not see the satire? Mocking the non action by some who are dealing w situation solely by stress eating?” (Anne with an “e”, 2017).

“guys tina fey is a comedian not an activist eating a cake is not enough to end racism eating cake is just a fun thing to do” (@DanaSchwartzzz).

“HOLY FUCK PEOPLE TAKING TINA FEY LITERALLY PLEASE MAKE IT STOP PLEASE IT IS SATIRE PLEASE” (@jbolognino).

Those that did recognize the satire and still rejected it assumed the message was inappropriate given the seriousness of the topic: “we get the joke, it’s just bad” (Problem Werewolf, 2017). This created a fallacious argument that some individuals simply could not recognize the satire and those that did, ignorantly accepted the assumptions when willfully inappropriate to do so.

### **Contextual considerations**

When exploring how consumers fallaciously responded to Fey’s satirical comments, it becomes important to note the underlying contextual considerations related to not only *SNL* as a political platform, but also the fundamental components to democracy that are challenged in Fey’s skit. Aforementioned, the foundation of *SNL* as political entertainment is, in the current climate, built upon the melding of politics with comedy and amusement. While it has been argued that the use of political parody is essential to democratic public culture by means of opening discourses and challenging the limitations of public speech, there could be other factors that influence its effectiveness or usefulness (Hariman, 2008). One of the more apparent potential pitfalls of such an approach to democratic participation and political discussion would be the level of seriousness that can become lost in parody. That is, just as viewers gravitated to *SNL* in hopes of viewing more Fey/Palin parody, it could be argued that this participation and consumption exists independent of any political or democratic goal – viewers simply watch because the skit is funny and entertaining. This can be related to discussions of literature that demonstrate media users’ perceptions of political parody influence to be correlated with the likelihood of activism; users only found a political parody to be a source of influence if it was positively correlated with willingness to engage in corrective action (Lim & Golan, 2011).

Beyond the potential blurred lines in political entertainment media, the goal of Fey’s skit (and the subsequent fallacious responses) is connected to highlighting fundamental flaws in the current political climate. Democratic stability rests upon not only a faith but also an assumption in human beings to govern behavior in ways that are stable and allow balance (Weingast, 2014). As Fey attempts to illustrate by suggesting many privileged members of society are inactive and unconcerned with human rights, members of the democratic society are not in a position to effectively govern themselves. Ironically, her point is even further reinforced by the fallacious responses to her critique – that is to say that several demographics, including those with higher education and media literacy, were not mentally equipped at processing, reflecting on, and engaging with this level of civic dialogue.

### **CONCLUSION**

With media permeating every-day life, their presence is indisputably persuasive, containing an ample number of messages targeted to different audiences. These media operate in different environments that in turn influence the effectiveness of the rhetoric present within them. The political entertainment media realm is one that functions uniquely on the basis of entertainment and humor in combination with real-world political issues, touched upon through cognitively demanding rhetorical strategies such as satire. The merging of politics and comedy within political entertainment has undoubtedly influenced public opinion, with the incorporation of satire within these mediums heightening the complexity and level of audience engagement that in turn amplifies cognitive demands when interpreting satirical messages, particularly in a political setting. An increase in cognitive exertion and incongruity between audience interpretation and satirist intention in

instances such as Tina Fey's "sheetcaking" exemplifies responses reflective of fallacious arguments. In a setting where humor is necessary in illustrating controversial opinion and highlighting political and social unrest, the surrounding media environment that contributes to misinterpretation and fallacious responses can be recognized as playing a pivotal role in rhetoric within these diverse mediums. The question then arises as to what components are necessary in producing effective rhetoric and accomplishing one's rhetorical goals in a complex media environment demanding cognitive resources.

A large portion of research into answering this question involves consideration of the rhetor and the audience – to what extent does the rhetor successfully employ rhetorical strategies and to what extent is the audience receptive of the rhetoric. Reflection into any potential causes of incongruity among intended versus received interpretation further explains the tendency of consumers to engage in fallacious responses. In this particular instance, the unique features of political entertainment in combination with the satirical content and cognitively demanding components to rhetorical strategies could be identified as factors that contribute to audience use of *ad hominem* and *false dilemma* fallacies. Further, an exploration into the dichotomous nature of news and political media reveals the contribution to the use of *false dilemma* – these media operate themselves in several instances on the assumption that political affiliations are either one or the other. These identification strategies further resonate within consumers and elicit feelings of personal attack given the biases involved with information processing and the use of *ad hominem* in compensation. As demonstrated through Tina Fey's *SNL* skit, though the fundamental use of communication involves rhetoric, the speaker and surrounding environmental components influence the ways in which speakers and audiences interact.

Given the nature of rhetoric and its use and function within popular culture, an exploration in the rhetorical roots of political entertainment media serves to heighten consumer awareness into the role media play in consumer life. Such an examination forces consumers and rhetoricians into a space that reflects upon the content of rhetorical messages and subsequently requires they respond in an effective, rhetorically sound manner. By encouraging reflection into how media operate using rhetoric, consumers exemplify effective media literacy. An increase in media literacy and awareness of media influence on cognitive processes as demanded in several rhetorical strategies can theoretically reduce the amount of fallacious rhetoric and dichotomy within news and social media. The need for further study into how media shape rhetorical practice and reception is therefore necessary in facilitating consumer engagement that is rhetorically valid and free of logical fallacies, which has the potential to change the way audiences interact with media – on a more informed and critically thought-out level.

## REFERENCES

- Abel, A. & Barthel, M. (2013) Appropriation of mainstream news: How Saturday night live changed the political discussion. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 30(1),1-16.
- Anne with an "e". [@mrsmaris]. (2017, August 18). "Did you not see the satire? Mocking the non action by some who arewh are dealing w situation solely by stress eating?" [Tweet]. Twitter, 18 August 2017, <https://twitter.com/mrsmaris/status/898544160092901376>
- Baumgartner, J., Morris, J., & Walth, N. (2012). The Fey effect: Young adults, political humor, and perceptions of Sarah Palin in the 2008 presidential election campaign. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76(1), 95-104.
- Boukes, M., Boomgaarden, H., Moorman, M., & de Vreese, C. (2015). At odds: Laughing and thinking? The appreciation, processing, and persuasiveness of political satire. *Journal of Communication*, 65, 721-744.
- Burke, K. (1984). *Attitudes toward history*. University of California Press.
- Cline, A. (2006). *Rhetorica: A rhetoric primer*. Retrieved from [rhetorica.net/textbook/index.htm](http://rhetorica.net/textbook/index.htm)
- Colletta, L. (2009). Political satire and postmodern irony in the age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 42(5), 856–874.

- Day, A. & Thompson, E. (2012). Live from New York, it's the fake news! Saturday night live and the (non) politics of parody. *Popular Communication*, 10, 170-182.
- Dommu, R. (2017, August 19). Why Tina Fey's 'sheet-caking' is the epitome of white privilege. *Out*. <https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2017/8/19/why-tina-feys-sheet-caking-epitome-white-privilege>
- Donna stole Roy Kent's Rolex. [@totallydonna]. (2017, August 2017). "I'm seeing some "TINA FEY SATIRE!!!" this morning. Like, even if that's true (which IDK IDK), satire doesn't WORK when reality is insane." [Tweet]. Twitter., 18 August 2017. <https://twitter.com/totallydonna/status/898551642689163264>
- Devon of Nine. [@dynamofire]. (2017, August 17). ...did Tina Fey really just "Let Them Eat Cake" this shit. [Tweet]. [Moment]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/dynamofire/status/898423964992548865>
- Drase, M. [@MorganDrase]. (2017, August 18). "I adore both Tina Fey and sheetcake. But lets dismantle white supremacy and THEN we deserve to stay at home and yell into cake." [Tweet]. Twitter., 18 August 2017, <https://twitter.com/MorganDrase/status/898481661020692480>
- Edison, A. [@aedison]. (2017, August 17). "Tina Fey adapts "don't show up" as an anti-facism strategy from her years of doing the same for people of color, queer people, lower-clas—". [Tweet]. Twitter, 17 August 2017. , <https://twitter.com/aedison/status/898388738794962945>
- Esralew, S. & Young, D. (2012). The influence of parodies on mental models: Exploring the Tina Fey-Sarah Palin phenomenon. *Communication Quarterly*, 60(3), 338-352.
- Fox News. (2017, August 18). Tina Fey suggests eating sheet cake over protesting alt-right rallies. *Fox News*. <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2017/08/18/tina-fey-suggests-eating-sheet-cake-over-protesting-alt-right-rallies.html>
- Gorcenski, E. [@EmilyGorcenski]. (2017, August 18). "Instead of eating cake and parroting provably-failed tactics, Tina Fey could simply fill all the GoFundMes for Black people injured on a12. [Tweet]/ " Twitter., 18 August 2017, <https://twitter.com/EmilyGorcenski/status/898523243002212352>
- Gring-Pemble, L. & Watson, M. (2010). The rhetorical limits of satire: An analysis of James Finn Garner's politically correct bedtime stories. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 89(2), 132-153.
- Gross, A. & Dascal, M. (2001). The conceptual unity of Aristotle's rhetoric. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 34(4), 275-291.
- Hariman, R. (2008). Political parody and public culture. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 94, 247-272.
- Hasper, P. (2012). The ingredients of Aristotle's theory of fallacy. *Argumentation*, 27, 31-47.
- Heim, J. (2017, August 14). Recounting a day of rage, hate, violence and death. *Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm\\_term=.de72b8b5f308](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm_term=.de72b8b5f308)
- Hepp, A. & Couldry, N. (2010). *Introduction: media events in globalized media cultures*. In N. Couldry, A. Hepp, & F. Krotz (Eds.). *Media events in a global age* (1-39.). New York: Routledge.
- Hill, D. & Weingrad, J. (1986). *Saturday night: A backstage history of Saturday night live*. New York, NY: Beech Tree Books.
- Hirsh, S. (2017, August 18). The internet is pissed at Tina Fey for suggesting we fight Nazism with sheet cake. *SomeCards*. <https://www.someecards.com/news/politics/tina-fey-sheet-cake-nazism-backlash/>
- Hmielowski, J., Holbert, L., & Lee, J. (2011). Predicting the consumption of political tv satire: Affinity for political humor, the daily show, and the Colbert report. *Communication Monographs*, 78(1), 96-114.
- Holbert, R. & Young, D. (2012). Exploring relations between political entertainment media and traditional political communication information outlets. *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*. Wiley Online Library.
- Holbert, L. (2016). *Entertainment television and political campaigns: The political satire appropriateness (PSA) model*. In W. L. Benoit (Ed.) *Praeger handbook of political campaigning in the United States*. Praeger.
- Holbert, L., Tchernev, J., Walther, W., Esralew, S., & Benski, K. (2013). Young voter perceptions of political satire as persuasion: A focus on perceived influence, persuasive intent, and message strength. *Journal*

- of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 57( 2), 170-186.
- Kindred. [@itskindred]. (2017, August 18). tina fey telling people who historically don't show up to fight white supremacy not to show up is... well, it's consistent. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/itskindred/status/898542803227033600>
- Kane, V. (2017, August 18). Tina Fey has some great advice for people who don't actually want to do anything about white supremacy. *TheMarySue*. <https://www.themarysue.com/let-them-eat-sheet-cake/>
- LaMarre, H., Landreville, K., & Beam, M. (2009). The irony of satire: Political ideology and the motivation to see what you want to see in the Colbert report. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14(2), 212-231.
- Lee, H. & Kwak, N. (2014). The affect effect of political satire: Sarcastic humor, negative emotions, and political participation. *Mass Communication and Society*, 17, 307-328.
- Leggett, B. (2012, October 16). History of classical rhetoric – an overview of its early development (1). Rhetorical and Leadership Blog Network.. Retrieved from <http://blog.iese.edu/leggett/2012/10/16/history-of-classical-rhetoric-an-overview-of-its-early-development/>
- Lewinski, M. (2014). Argumentative polylogues: Beyond dialectical understanding of fallacies. *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, 36(4), 193-218.
- Merica, D. (2017, August 16). Trump says both sides to blame amid Charlottesville backlash. *CNN politics*.
- Moy, P. & Pfau, M. (2000). *With malice toward all?: The media and public confidence in democratic institutions*. Praeger Publishers.
- Murphy, J., Katula, R., & Hoppmann, M. (2013). *A Synoptic history of classical rhetoric*. London, UK: Routledge., 2013.
- Nissel, A. [@AngelaNissel]. (2017, August 18). "I can't. Really? Eat cake instead of fight? Y'all been doing that since day one for us. Switch it up.[Tweet]" Twitter., 18 August 2017, Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/AngelaNissel/status/898569860980002818>
- Nussbaum, M. (1992). Human functioning and social justice: In defense of Aristotelian essentialism. *Political Theory*, 20(2), 202-246.
- Patterson, E. (2012). Fracturing Tina Fey: A critical analysis of postfeminist television comedy stardom. *The Communication Review*, 15, 232-251.
- Reinheld, A. (2006). 'Saturday night live' and the weekend update: The formative years of comedy news dissemination. *Journalism History*, 31( 4), 190-197.
- Robles, J. S. [@J\_S\_Robles]. (2017, August 18). "So about Tina Fey...not all drag queens are Black and not all Black men are prone to violent behavior. [Tweet]." Twitter., 18 August 2017, [https://twitter.com/J\\_S\\_Robles/status/898577429400301568](https://twitter.com/J_S_Robles/status/898577429400301568)
- Saturday Night Live. (2017, August 17). *Weekend update: Tina Fey on protesting after Charlottesville - SNL*. [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVvpXZxXWZU>
- Terminally Chill. [@TerminiTweets]. (2017, August 18). "I'm muting anyone who doesn't understand that Tina Fey is a comedian and was making a joke. We can still have jokes, right?" [Tweet]. Twitter. , 18 August 2017, <https://twitter.com/TerminiTweets/status/898571587380666368>
- Test, G. (1991). *Satire: Spirit and art*. Tampa: University of South Florida Press.
- Tom and Lorenzo. [@tomandlorenzo].(2017, August 18). Love Tina Fey, but I'm REALLY not feeling her 'Ignore racism and stress-eat instead' take. It strikes me as willfully naïve and privileged.[Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/tomandlorenzo/status/898495144999235584>
- Walton, D. (2008). Formalization of the ad hominem argumentation scheme. *Journal of Applied Logic*, 8, 1-21.
- Weingast, B. R. (2014). The political foundations of democracy and the rule of the law. *American Political Science Review*, 91, 245-263.
- Yap, A. (2012). Ad hominem fallacies, bias, and testimony. *Argumentation*, 27, 97-109.

Lammon

Zalta, E. (2010). Aristotle's rhetoric. In *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>

Zimmerman, A. (2017, August 17). Tina Fey's 'Eat Cake' strategy after Charlottesville is bad advice. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/tina-feys-eat-cake-strategy-after-charlottesville-is-bad-advice>

## **AUTHOR BIO**

Marissa Lammon is a PhD student in Media Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. She spent her undergraduate degree in psychology studying adolescent development and has used this background as a foundation while researching media throughout her graduate program. She specializes in psychological concepts in animation, specifically how media presentations and messaging can shape child and adolescent cognition and socialization.

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

### **APA:**

Lammon, M. (2022). Cake and conclusions: Rhetorical roots in “sheetcaking” and fallacious community responses. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 9(3). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-3/cake-and-conclusions-rhetorical-roots-in-sheetcaking-and-fallacious-community-responses/>

### **MLA:**

Lammon, Marissa. “Cake and Conclusions: Rhetorical Roots in “Sheetcaking” and Fallacious Community Responses.” *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2022. <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-3/cake-and-conclusions-rhetorical-roots-in-sheetcaking-and-fallacious-community-responses/>



All papers in *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License. For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.