

BOOK REVIEWS

Baumgartner, Jody C., and Jonathan S. Morris, eds. *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Comedy has become a legitimate news genre in the United States today. According to a 2004 study by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 61 percent of young Americans regularly or sometimes learned about the presidential campaign from late-night talk shows and news parody shows such as *The Daily Show*.¹ *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age* is a collection of essays by communication scholars and political scientists tackling the phenomenon of today's visibility of political humor. The essays, almost all based on empirical research, address humor and politics from a number of angles: How do different media incorporate political humor? How do audiences approach such humor? Does political satire contribute to political disengagement and apathy?

The book is divided into four parts. The first section considers the phenomenon of political humor in detail and outlines directions for research on the effects of political humor. In the opening essay Rachel Caufield suggests that

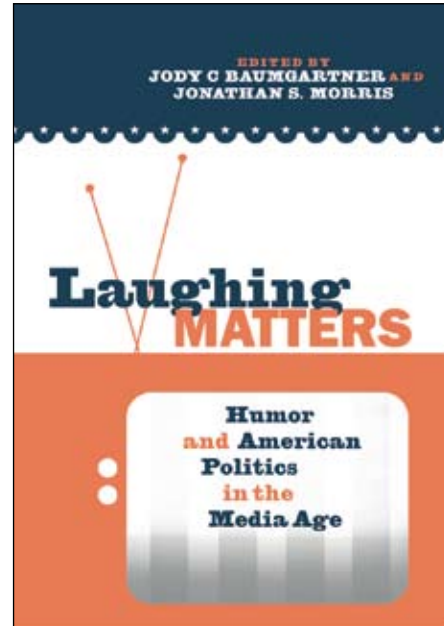
scholars should differentiate between political satire and other forms of political humor. Unlike other kinds of conventional humor, "satire is *artful* political critique" (4). To be understood, satire requires a certain level of political sophistication on the part of the audience, and hence, its impact on audiences may be different than humor that thoughtlessly ridicules politicians. Geoffrey Baym's chapter attempts to historicize the current popularity of political humor, placing the prominence of "serious comedy" in the context of postmodernity. He attributes the erosion of boundaries between politics and entertainment to the recent technological developments in the media, changes in the nature of media ownership, and the multiplication of cultural standards. Political humorists comment on this state and use satire to reclaim the values of traditional journalism. In a way, according to Baym, they represent "a fusion of postmodern style and modernist intentions" (35).

The second section addresses the forms, content, and effects of media political humor outside television. The chapters in this section demonstrate a tension that researchers encounter when addressing the impacts of political humor on democracy. For example, Geoffrey Sheagley and his colleagues consider how the presentation of political information in the *Onion*, a popular satirical newspaper, contributes to the "disenchantment" of politics. Analyzing its coverage of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, they find that the following frames were predominant: "politics is stupid," "politics is dirty," and "making fun of the media" (88). They conclude such coverage "may serve to disengage citizens from politics" (92). In the same section,

¹ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Perceptions of Partisan Bias Seen as Growing—Especially by Democrats. Cable and Internet loom large in fragmented political universe" (11 January 2004): <<http://people-press.org/report/200>>.

Jody Baumgartner suggests the impact of political humor is more complex. Through experimental research, he finds that those who regularly view online humor are cynical about, and distrustful of, government, but they are still politically active.

The third section of *Laughing Matters* focuses on how politics is represented in comedy television. The chapters consider how the late-night shows may impact the election outcomes, how the animated series *The Simpsons* makes politics funny and relevant for diverse audiences, and whether differing patterns of sitcom viewing among Bush and Kerry voters were another battleground of America's culture wars. The authors show that televised political humor can be quite important. David Niven and his colleagues analyze the representation of Bill Clinton on the *Late Show*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Late Night* between 1996 and 2001. One interesting finding is that those who learned about politics from late-night comedy tended to have a more positive opinion about Clinton's job performance as president. They find that even at the time of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, jokes tended to portray Clinton favorably. It was Lewinsky and Hillary Clinton who were typically the butt of derogatory jokes. Surprisingly, the authors interpret this finding in terms of psychological differences in the way men and women respond to infidelity. Since the staff writing these jokes is predominantly male, they explain, these jokes represent the psychological specificity of men dealing with infidelity. A more interesting way to theorize this imbalance in the jokes, it appears, would be to consider it within the context of gender relations and inequalities.



The last section of the book concentrates on audience perceptions of political humor. Again here we see disparate findings. On the one hand, Brandon Rottinghaus and his colleagues discovered that, for college students, *The Daily Show* may become a “gateway” to news consumption” because the show motivated the students to seek more information in hard-news sources afterwards (293). On the other hand, Jonathan Morris and Jody Baumgartner find that exposure to *The Daily Show*'s criticism of the news media may cause young viewers to be cynical about the media. This section also contains a useful overview of existing empirical studies of Americans' attitudes towards late-night comedy shows (see Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao's essay).

Overall, this volume is skewed towards quantitative explorations of the effects of political humor. At the same time, its authors fail to come to an agreement on the role of political humor and satire for

democratic participation. Doris Graber notes this in the “Conclusion” and suggests more testing of political humor effects in various audiences. However, one reason for the volume’s mixed findings may not be the insufficient empirical data but the narrow research question. Treating political humor only through cause-effect epistemology, the volume’s authors end up highlighting just two variables: political humor and political participation (narrowly defined), while all other processes that occur in today’s society are seen as static or irrelevant. More important questions are never asked: Why is it that satire becomes a prominent way to address today’s political reality? What makes carnivalesque laughter one of the most common contemporary practices of political participation? What does the current popularity of political humor tell us about the contemporary public sphere and about our time? Methodologically, historical analysis, critical and feminist theory, and ethnographic research would illuminate many questions unanswered in this volume. This book may serve as an introduction into the field of political humor research, but it is important to go farther.

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Fandy, Mamoun. *(Un)Civil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World.* Westport: Praeger, 2007.

In the opening lines of *(Un)Civil War of Words*, political scholar Mamoun Fandy notes that, since 9/11, a global audience has turned to Al-Jazeera as the source for information on Osama bin Laden and his next target. In today’s jittery era of terrorism, the Iraq War, and misinterpretations and misinformation between Arab and Western countries, Fandy seeks to explain the politics of such influential Arab media—the television, newspaper, and radio outlets that tangibly affect how people worldwide view and respond to political events. He provides in-depth analysis of the journalists themselves, Arab news coverage, and the effects of interstate and intra-state conflicts. At the same time, he also attempts to illustrate how anti-Americanism and America’s own media failures in the Middle East interact with authoritarian governments to create inherently political Arab journalism, with significant obstacles to, and implications for, free speech and political change.

Several overarching arguments animate Fandy’s erudite and transnational study. First, he dispels the notion that Al-Jazeera represents all Arab media or Arab society. There are over 700 satellite television stations alone in the Arab world, and most, he suggests, reflect the diverse political rivalries of their national leaders, as well as complex political environments that can combine secular and religious laws, webs of ruling families, and other factors. Fandy argues that theories of Western media studies—such as those developed by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo



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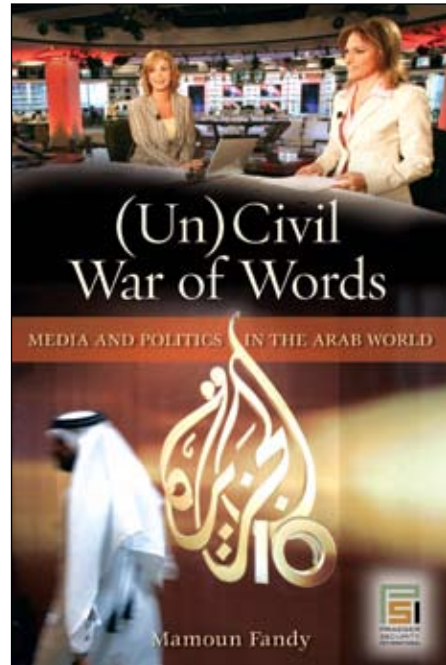
Mancini in *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*—are inadequate for explaining Arab journalism. Such theories either assume a commercial model for news outlets based on advertising revenues—while Arab media often operate at a financial loss to serve political agendas—or a simpler relationship between media and the state that fails to recognize the particular circumstances of different Western and Arab nations. Similar to James Curran and Myung-Jin Park’s *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, Fandy also seeks to liberate media studies from a mere East-West focus, or even from Western ideas of public versus private or an independent and objective media. He emphasizes the ways in which regional political concerns significantly determine not just news coverage, but even the slant of anti-Americanism.

Thus, stories against America (and Israel, among other countries) often are less about the West than indirectly reflective of internal and external conflicts among Arab states; blaming the West, Fandy suggests, sometimes can be used to distract Arabs from the failing policies of home governments.

Fandy’s arguments progress through a sequence of case studies that illustrate the political forces governing Arab media. He first studies Egypt as an historical precedent for Arab media practices, citing the ways in which “the Egyptian laws and regulations that govern access to airwaves, patterns of media ownership, and various social and political taboos have been exported to countries throughout the Arab world” (19). In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states, Fandy suggests, reporters sometimes are intimidated,

jailed, kidnapped, or even killed—practices that combine with voluntary and involuntary censorship to discourage balanced reporting. He also claims media owners help determine what is reported. In Qatar and Saudi Arabia—which continually wage a media war through their respective television networks, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya—state-run media outlets often criticize other Arab countries, especially rival nations in interstate conflicts, but not their home state. In nations suffering from intra-state strife or internal ethnic conflict, even seemingly private, “independent” media can be critical of rival political forces but not their own patron party or group. Fandy shows this by comparing the coverage of Lebanese media outlets with different political affiliations, following the assassination of Rafiq Al-Hariri, the country’s former prime minister. He also analyzes how reporters and commentators powerfully determine news coverage, since they reflect their own nationalistic, ethnic, and ideological biases in broadcasts that reach transnational audiences.

Finally, Fandy discredits American efforts to influence the Arab world through its own Middle Eastern media initiatives, especially the recent U.S.-sponsored television network, Al-Hurra TV. By failing to capture the hearts and minds of the Arab world through a litany of strategic mistakes, which Fandy details, he argues that Al-Hurra and other media failures have combined with U.S. actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel to severely undermine American objectives in the region. In looking toward solutions for Arab media and the U.S., however, Fandy first subverts a commonly held belief in politics and media studies—the idea that more media outlets lead toward



greater freedom and political change, especially because Arab audiences lack trust in media based on historical experience. In fact, Fandy states: “The Arab media in its current state is an impediment to genuine political reform rather than its catalyst. It functions as a tool of governments against both internal and external enemies” (141). Thus, to reach a greater understanding with the Arab world, Fandy argues that the U.S. must abandon actions like regime change, which have “earned the animosity of Arab nationalists, the radical Islamists, and the ruling elite all at the same time” (142). Instead, he suggests America should focus more modestly on reforming Al-Hurra in order to help establish media trust in the region, privileging instead a “war of ideas” that communicates U.S. values and policies (119).

Ultimately, as its title suggests, *(Un) Civil War of Words* importantly shifts the focus of media studies in the Arab world

away from an East-West bias; instead, it highlights the ways in which Arab media are implicated within the “civil war” of ideologies that compete among different Arab countries and within certain Arab nations themselves. Although the study provides a much-needed, new perspective, one possible critique is that Fandy at times seems to draw subjective conclusions without providing sufficient data to corroborate them, such as when he makes generalizations about biased coverage or conjectures about the motives behind editorial choices. These infrequent instances, however, seem to be minor difficulties within the rich, expansive scope of the book, especially considering Fandy’s substantial credentials as an insider in Arab media and politics. His book is filled with hands-on interviews with Arab journalists, timely anecdotes, and incisive original research, and his judgments are supported by a career spent teaching at universities and institutes in both the U.S. and the United Kingdom, appearing on numerous Arab and Western television shows, and writing for U.S. newspapers and as a columnist for a pan-Arab daily newspaper. Fandy’s work thus provides very relevant and compelling insights into the political, ethnic, and religious influences that shape today’s important world of Arab media.

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